The Making OF the Muppet Show

MUPPETS & MEN

by Christopher Finch

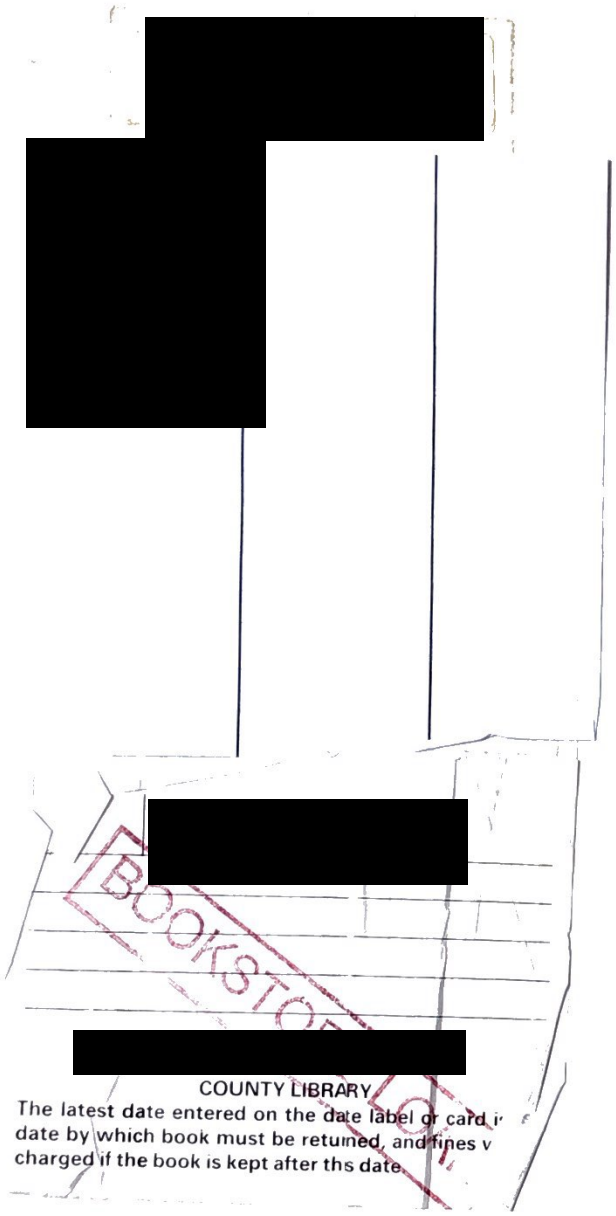
"Among the dozen or so people in the room, a young woman is carving a rabbit's head out of Styrofoam and a bearded man is adjusting an elaborate wig on a Japanese figure, while another young woman is sewing beads onto a gown that might fit a plump four-year-old. Cartons on wooden shelves bear labels that read "Chorus Costumes: Girls and Hens," "Odd and Large Eyes," "Legs and Some Shoes." All around, on racks that support them in remarkably lifelike poses, are figures familiar to television viewers around the world."

That "room" is a Muppet workshop, and in this big, full-of-information book—crammed with pictures in color and black and white—we are taken into that workshop and into conference rooms that lie behind *The Muppet Show.* Together, pictures and text (the narrative is by the author of *The Art of Walt Disney*) reveal to us more about the Muppet phenomenon than has ever before been made known: how it was born, how its unique (and uniquely cheerful) sorcery is accomplished, who does what and how it's done—and how so individual and unconventional a group of artists can flourish in today's high-pressure world of television and film.

We see, at their work, the men and women who created and run the muppets—from Jim Henson (the Founder and Frog) to Frank Oz (Miss P.) to the dozens of other puppeteers, artists, musicians, writers, and denizens of the workshop. And through all these Muppet-makers we come to know the unknown side of all the familiar Muppet characters. We've known Kermit the Frog, Miss Piggy, Fozzie Bear and the others for years, but now we see how all their personalities and appearances were developed (and how they are continually elaborated upon), how they are constructed and how they are operated. We watch as the weekly shows are planned, rehearsed and produced; as the guest stars—from Linda Ronstadt to Tony Randall to Rudolf Nureyev to Lena Horne—learn to perform with the puppets-come-to-life (usually discovering a real relationship: "When Kermit is up there, staring you in the face, you believe in him completely," says Carol Burnett). And we see the hidden technical magic that makes possible the extraordinary *believability* of everything that takes place in Muppetland.

All this is here—adding to our enjoyment of and amazement at these strange and wonderful beings—in a beautifully designed and illustrated book that distills the fun, the ingenuity, the antic genius that millions have come to know and love.

Christopher Finch is the author of *The Art of Walt Disney* and *Rainbow.* He lives in New York City with his wife and daughter.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Of Muppets & Men

by Christopher Finch
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Of Muppets

& Men

The Making of The Muppet Show

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Acknowledgments

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Very special thanks are, of course, due to Jim Henson who, despite his daunting schedule, spent many hours patiently explaining just what goes on behind the scenes at *The Muppet Show.* Taking the complexities of the show for granted, he made them accessible in a way no one else could have done. I was also fortunate enough to have had several extended conversations with Jane Henson, who provided an historical perspective that was invaluable.

Frank Oz was especially forthright in his advice and was able to offer unique insights from the point of view of the Muppet performer. David Lazer was of assistance in a hundred different ways and was a mine of information, the source I could always turn to when all else failed.

The Muppet performers are a group of remarkably gifted individuals. All of them were generous with their time and knowledge. My heartfelt thanks go to Dave Goelz, Richard Hunt, Jerry Nelson, Kathy Mullen, Steve Whitmire and Louise Gold.

As head writer for *The Muppet Show* and a veteran of the Muppet organization, Jerry Juhl was one of my most crucial sources. The other members of the writing staff–Chris Langham, David Odell and the late Don Hinkley–were also generous with their time. Since music is an integral part of *The Muppet Show,* I was fortunate to spend a good deal of time in the company of Ray Charles and Derek Scott.

Caroly Wilcox was my guide to the New York workshop and Amy Van Gilder my main source of information about the evolution of the London shop. Among other Muppet designers and builders, I would also like to thank Franz "Faz" Fazakas, Rollin Crewson, Bob McCormick, Bobby Payne, Calista Hendrickson, Jan Rosenthal, Barbara Davis, Nomi Frederick, Polly Smith and Cheryl Henson.

The ATV production staff was always helpful and I would like to express my special appreciation to Peter Harris, Phillip Casson, Richard Holloway and David Chandler. Thanks are due too to Martin Baker, Patsy de Lord and Jill Colley, while Bruce McNally and David Dagley were invaluable guides to the world of Studio D.

Among guest stars, Linda Lavin, Carol Burnett, Ethel Merman, Christopher Reeve, Harry Belafonte, Linda Ronstadt, James Coburn and Paul Simon were generous in granting interviews and answering my questions.

In New York, Bob Mandell was kind enough to make ITC's resources available to me, and Al Gottesman and Michael K. Frith of Henson Associates provided me with valuable background information. Also Debbie Fierro and Kathy Powell spent hours and hours researching photos. Bob Gottlieb of Knopf contributed many important suggestions, and it was always a pleasure to work with Jane Leventhal who, along with the entire New York staff of Henson Associates, made me feel completely at home during the many weeks of research conducted on East 69th Street.

Of Muppets & Men

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1. Studio D

ATV's Elstree Television Studios, part of Lord Grade's entertainment empire, are located in Borehamwood, an island of exurbia on the northern outskirts of London. Aside from the predominance of British accents, this might be a production center in Hollywood or Burbank. The more public corridors are lined with photographic blow-ups of the stars who have worked here; arc lights and props are shunted about on forklifts and dollies. Adjacent to Studio D, however, is a large L-shaped room that is unique in the television world. This is the Elstree edition of the Muppet workshop. Here the accents, for the most part, are American. Among the dozen or so people in the room, a young woman is carving a rabbit's head out of Styrofoam and a bearded man is adjusting an elaborate wig on a Japanese figure, while another young woman is sewing beads onto a gown that might fit a plump four-year-old.

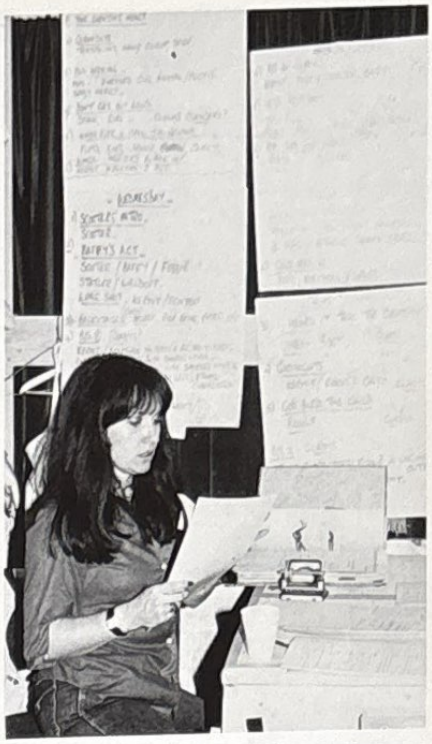
Left: In the London workshop, Muppet costumer Polly Smith prepares Miss Piggy for a patriotic production number. Opposite: Rollin Crewson selects eyes for a "Whatnot" puppet, and Sara Paul puzzles over a sketch, while Bob Payne and Barbara Davis work on Japanese characters needed for a number in the show starring James Coburn.

Cartons on wooden shelves bear labels that read "Chorus Costumes: Girls and Hens," "Odd and Large Eyes," "Wagnerian Hats," "Polystyrene and Mouth Rubber Scraps," "Legs and Some Shoes." All around, on racks that support them in remarkably life-like poses, are figures familiar to television viewers around the world: Kermit the Frog, costumed and uncostumed; Miss Piggy, sirenish in a *décolleté* dress; Fozzie Bear, the Great Gonzo, Scooter, Statler and Waldorf, Rowlf the Dog, Robin, Sam the Eagle, Captain Link Hogthrob, Julius Strangepork, Lew Zealand, Crazy Harry, Dr. Bunsen Honeydew, Beaker, Dr. Teeth, Zoot the saxophonist, Floyd Pepper, Animal, Janice (in her nurse's costume), Beauregarde and Rizzo Rat. Dozens of less recognizable characters are visible too, one-shot bit players with interchangeable eyes, noses, wigs, known in the Muppet world as "whatnots." In a corner of the workshop hangs the extensive wardrobe—everything from satin gowns to motorcycle leathers—that the versatile Miss Piggy has accumulated during the five-year run of *The Muppet Show*.

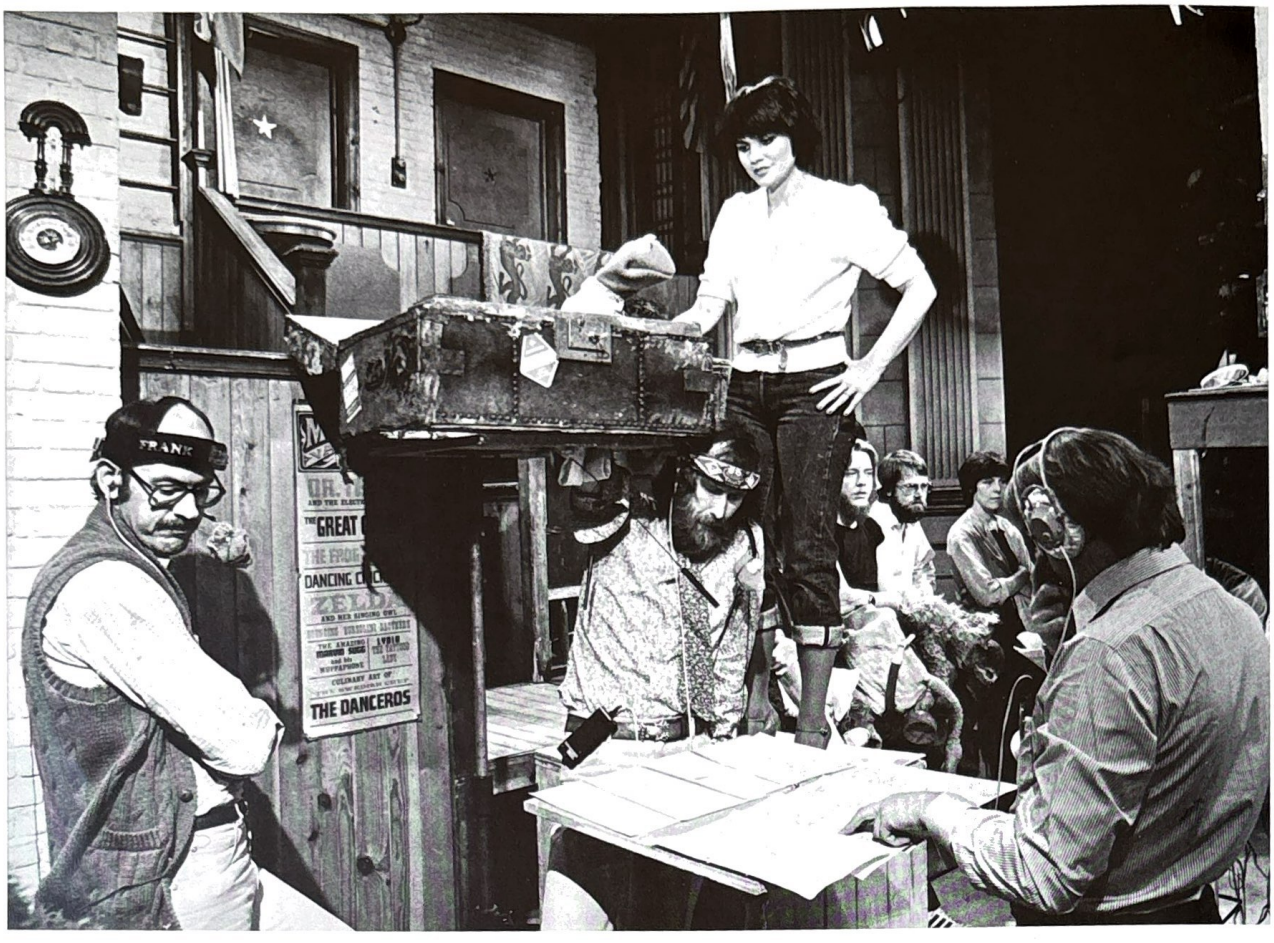
A young man with curly hair, dressed in a sweatshirt and jeans, emerges from a partitioned-off lounge area, casually places a mustachioed cowboy figure on his right arm, and the figure suddenly comes to life, announcing to no one in particular, "Hey, I'ma an Italian cowboy. You musta seen me inna spaghetti westerns." Both of them, man and Muppet, disappear through a doorway which leads to the stage floor, pausing to address a still photographer who is headed in the opposite direction.

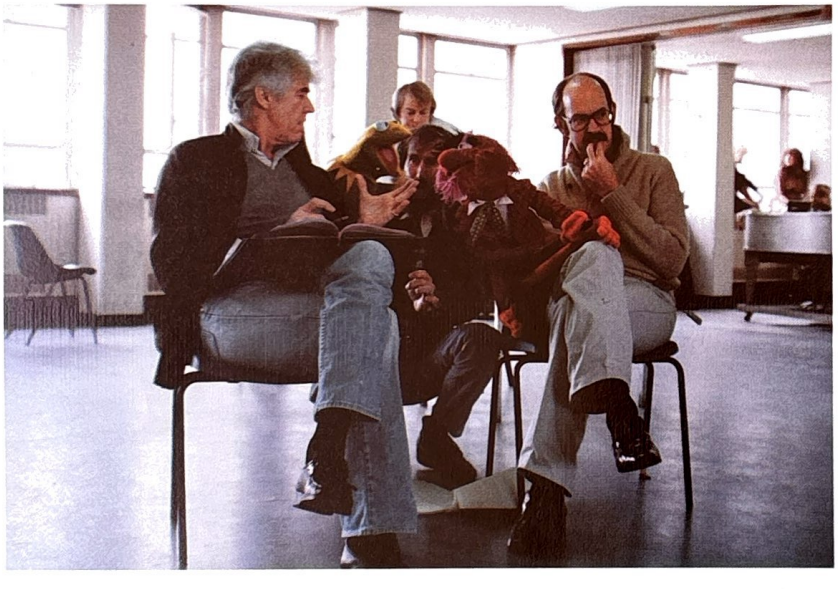
"Thas right. I'ma an Italian cowboy from Noo Joysey."

Studio D resembles any other large television studio, tall and cavernous like an airplane hangar, with banks of floodlamps suspended overhead and other lights, on stands, scattered about the floor. There are three video cameras, one mounted on a crane. Nearby are two large color monitors, while, dotted about the studio, propped up in boxes and on stepped wooden frames, are a number of small black-and-white monitors which are among the essential tools of the Muppet performers' craft. Dozens of cables, some as thick as a child's wrist, snake across the floor, but the thirty-odd men



EXIT
STOCK COSTUMES
SKIRTS
STOCK COSTUMES
JEANS





Above: On the backstage set, Frank Oz and Linda Ronstadt stand by as Jim Henson, with Kermit up, consults the script. Left: In the rehearsal room, guest star James Coburn runs through his lines, while Frank Oz and Jim Henson study Animal's reaction in a mirror.

and women moving about the studio avoid tripping on them as if by some sixth sense.

Most of the activity on this particular day centers on a set that is familiar to television viewers around the world, the backstage set that has been home to much of the chaos and mayhem that have run through *The Muppet Show* since its inception in 1976. The set is realistically detailed. On the upper level are the doors to the two star dressing rooms, the one on the right assigned to the irrepressible Miss Piggy, the other to whoever happens to be that week's guest star. From this level, where a cat controlled by a hidden hand dozes on a ledge, a flight of stairs descends to the nether world which is Kermit's domain. The entire set is built on a platform which raises it several feet above the floor so that puppeteers can stand in front of it—the characters they animate held above their heads—without intruding on camera.

The atmosphere in the studio is uncommonly relaxed, especially for a show that is in its fifth season. Several visitors are looking on from the floor while others are scattered through the bank of theater seats that rises to one side. As grips and electricians make final adjustments, three men confer in front of the set, each wearing an earphone that places him in contact with the director hidden in the control booth high above. The shortest of the three is Richard Holloway, the floor manager, the director's spokesman on the floor, the man who must make sure that everything in Studio D is running smoothly, a task that demands considerable tact and diplomacy. Next to him stands a tall, thin, serious-looking man with glasses and a dark mustache. This is Frank Oz, the pre-eminent Muppet performer, the man who brings Miss Piggy, Fozzie Bear, Animal and many other characters to life. Hands on hips, staring at the floor, he listens to the other tall, slim figure, who wears a full beard, maroon cord jeans and a floral shirt with a Liberty-print necktie. This is Jim Henson, creator of the Muppets, the man around whom *The Muppet Show* and the entire Muppet universe revolve. Kermit the Frog, a creature who first appeared on the home screen a quarter of a century ago, is in place on Henson's right arm but held "at ease," his head pointing toward the floor. The subject under discussion is a mundane technical problem, but as Henson speaks the frog's mouth moves too.

The scene to be shot involves Kermit, the guest star (James Coburn), Scooter (performed by Richard Hunt, who has now put the Italian cowboy aside), the cat (performed by Kathryn Mullen), along with Miss Piggy, Animal and an octopus (all of whom will be performed by Frank Oz). First there are walk-throughs, for the benefit of the director and the camera operators, with Richard Holloway standing in for the guest star. Then Coburn is called from his dressing room and there are more walk-throughs so that he has an opportunity to rehearse his lines.

With the guest star on set, the mood changes perceptibly. Whereas everything till now has been rather low-keyed and matter-of-fact, suddenly the performers begin ad-libbing, not as themselves but in character, bringing the puppets to life, giving the guest an opportunity to relate to them before taping commences. Scooter keeps reminding everyone that his uncle owns the theater. "If you have any trouble with these guys, Mr. Coburn," he says, "just give me the word. I'll call some of my uncle's friends!" Kermit, after a little bit of improvised business, turns to Camera 2 and remarks, "How 'bout that!" He pants his familiar little laugh which, imperceptibly at first, then precipitously, slides down through about an octave and a half so that it become's Jim Henson's own laugh, directed now at Coburn, who is still laughing with Kermit. After fifteen minutes of rehearsal with the guest, everyone is close to being ready for the first take. All of the performers except Coburn, whose voice is picked up

Floor manager Richard Holloway and Jim Henson compare notes while a scene is being set up.

by a sound boom, have donned headsets, the microphones of which are equipped with urethane rubber mouthpieces, some carved and painted to resemble Muppet characters with whom they are associated. (Henson's mike, for example, has the form of a sponge Kermit.) As the puppeteers settle into their positions, a makeup girl wipes perspiration from Coburn's brow and a woman equipped with a needle and thread makes last-minute repairs to Miss Piggy's costume.

Two of the running themes in this episode are the infatuation of Animal, the show's resident wild man, with tough guy Coburn, and Animal's pursuit of a troupe of performing octopuses, whose lugubrious drumming has infuriated him. Both themes are present in this scene, which will place physical demands on one performer, Frank Oz, that the home viewer will never suspect.

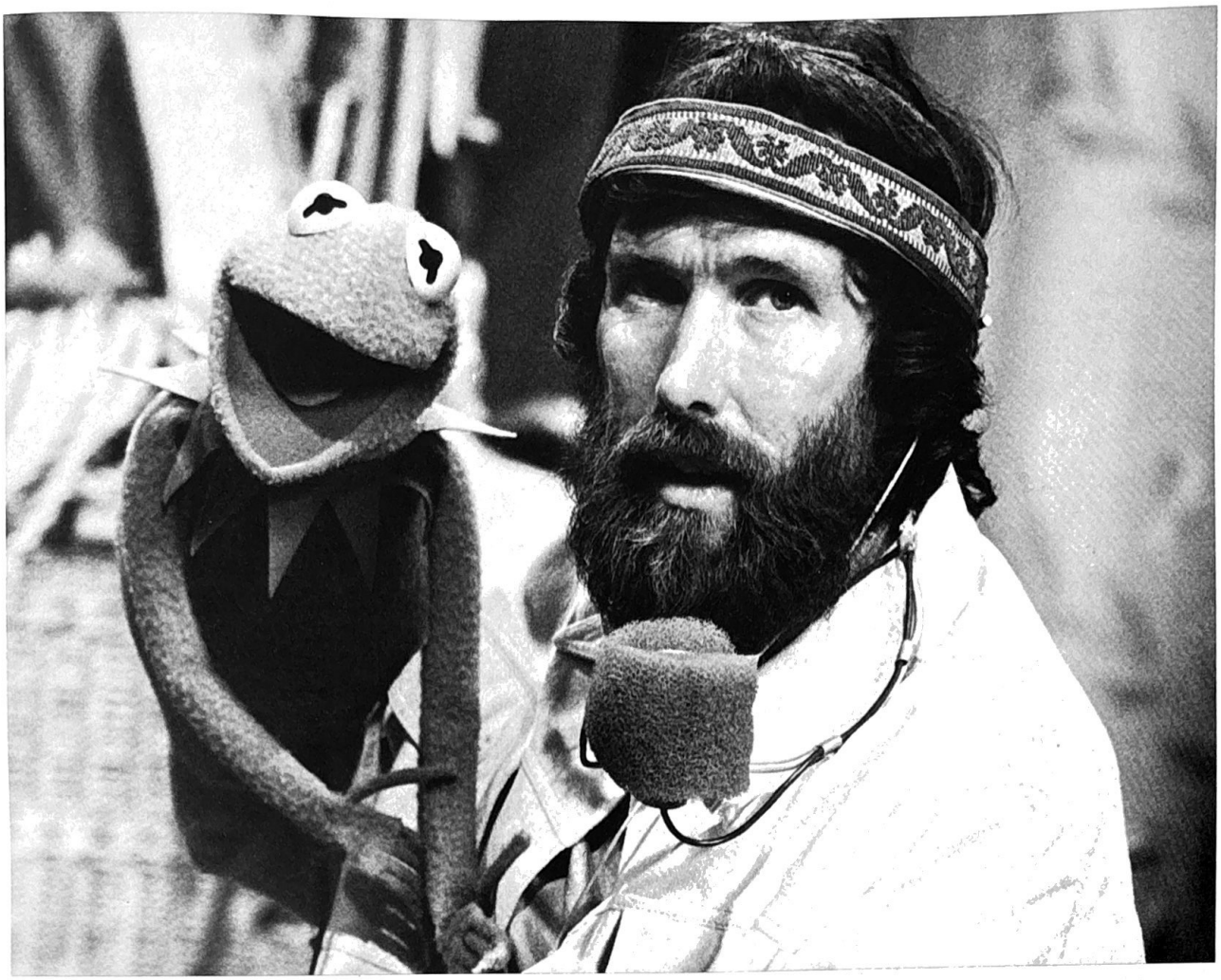
The scene begins with Oz, performing Miss Piggy, perched on a platform approximately six feet above the floor, behind the door that leads, in our imaginations, to Piggy's dressing room. The Divine Miss P. appears at this door and asks Scooter, who is at the desk on the lower level, if the octopuses are still at large. Scooter informs her that, the way things appear to be going, the octopuses are likely to end up in bouillabaisse. Remarking that she has always thought Bouillabaisse to be one of the prettiest little towns in France, Miss Piggy exits, closing her door behind her. As she does so, James Coburn emerges from his dressing room and descends the stairs, engaging at the same time in a brief dialogue with Kermit that serves to cue Animal's entrance.

In the few seconds that separate this cue from Miss Piggy's exit, Frank Oz must jump down from his perch (as silently as possible), wrench his headset off with his free hand and pass it through a gap between the solid part of the set and a stage flat, carefully disengage himself from Miss Piggy, hand her to an assistant, race around the end of the flat, place his headset back in position, pause for a moment while another assistant slips Animal onto his right arm and the octopus onto his left, bring the two characters together so that they appear to be wrestling, then run fifteen feet or so to the set, where (crouching down so his head will not be seen by the camera) he must pick up his cue on a strategically placed monitor and bring Animal and the octopus—held high above his head—into the shot, locked in mortal combat.

After a brief delay, while Oz checks the correct pronunciation of "bouillabaisse," everything is set. Richard Holloway calls out, "Fifteen seconds . . . Very quiet, gentlemen, please." A hush descends on the studio and Miss Piggy makes her imperious entrance.

The first take goes well until almost the last moment. While Coburn descends the stairs and exchanges banter with Kermit, the activity off camera is reminiscent of a pit stop at the Indianapolis 500. Oz dashes out from behind the flat, grabs a few quick breaths as Animal and the octopus are fitted onto his arms, then—roaring at the top of his lungs, crouched and twirling like a Dervish—he rushes toward Henson (who is watching his monitor while Kermit, held aloft, is looking the other way and registering astonishment at Animal's frenetic approach). Oz makes his cue on time but, off balance, half stumbles, continues to roar, his eyes fixed on the monitor, stretches his legs wide apart to keep his characters in shot, his face contorted as he acts out Animal's blood lust. Then he spins away from the camera and gasps, "I blew it!"

There is a ripple of laughter and Henson suggests they should watch the playback. "My arm showed," says Oz, but everyone watches the playback anyway. Even Scooter, still in position on Richard Hunt's arm, seems to be following the action,



Jim Henson and his best-known creation, Kermit the Frog, prepare to face the cameras.

making little flexing movements all the while, as if performing calisthenics. For all but a fraction of a second the take works beautifully. There is a good deal of spontaneous laughter while it is running, but Frank Oz is gloomy. "I blew it," he says again when it's over. Looking down at the floor, he smiles, then shakes his head in annoyance.

"Okay," he says, "let's try again."

They try again. This time, just as Oz twirls Animal and the octopus into the shot, Coburn fluffs a line. He instantly apologizes, obviously aware of the effort that is going into Oz's performance. Oz shrugs and laughs.

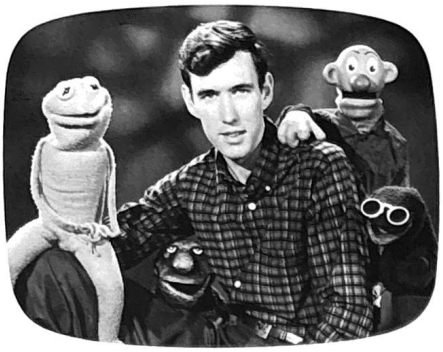
They try again. And again. One take goes perfectly until it is aborted by a sudden cry from the floor manager.

"Hold everything! Somebody lost an eye!"

The puppet with the detached retina is repaired on the spot and shooting continues. After several more attempts—and an expenditure of energy, on Oz's part, that would do credit to a decathlon performer—a take goes without mishap from beginning to end. As everyone watches the playback, a little tuft of red feather that has become detached from Animal's head floats upward in the heat from the lights.

2. The Birth of The Muppet Show

When *Sesame Street* was launched in 1970, Jim Henson's Muppets had been in existence for fifteen years. The Muppets' first success had come in 1955 when Henson, then still a freshman in college, and his wife-to-be, Jane, had devised a show called *Sam and Friends* which for eight years enjoyed an enthusiastic following in the Washington, D.C., area. Kermit first saw the light of day in 1956 as one of the regulars on that series. From 1957 on, the Muppets made many guest appearances on network shows, and for three years in the sixties one of Jim Henson's puppets, Rowlf the Dog, was the resident comedian on *The Jimmy Dean Show.* It was because of *Sesame Street,* however, that Muppet characters like Kermit, Grover, Big Bird, Oscar, Cookie Monster and Bert and Ernie became household names.



Sam and Friends, left and center, was a fixture for eight years on WRC television in Washington, D.C. For this show the young Jim Henson devised characters like Yorick, the skull-like creature seen here, and the earliest version of Kermit. It was Rowlf the Dog, right, who made the break-through as a regular on network television, appearing on the Jimmy Dean Show.

The Muppets were a tremendous success on *Sesame Street*, partly because they performed wonderful material—which appealed to parents as well as children—and partly because Jim Henson had developed a highly original way of staging puppet performances for television. He had taught himself everything he could about lenses, camera angles and special effects, and in particular he had evolved a way of working while watching the image on the television monitors in the studio so that the puppeteer was, in effect, both a performer and a member of the audience—could see exactly what he was doing as he did it.

By the early seventies the Henson organization began to think seriously about the possibilities of a network series for the Muppets, but it soon became apparent that *Sesame Street* had been a mixed blessing in that—given the peculiar reasoning of the television industry—its success had led to the Muppets falling into a category that was clearly labeled "children's entertainment." Henson and his associates did not accept this label. Between 1969 and 1972 four Muppet specials were produced for ABC, CBS and the Hughes Television Network, and during the first half of the seventies various packagers approached Henson with the idea of producing a syndicated series, but, as Executive Producer David Lazer puts it, "We thought syndication was a dirty word." For the time being, everyone associated with the Henson organization was prepared to wait, agreeing that they should settle for a network deal and nothing less.

The network that showed the most interest in the notion of a Muppet series was the American Broadcasting Company, then still running a poor third to its competitors and willing to experiment in its attempt to attract better ratings. ABC commissioned a pilot, which was broadcast in 1974 as *The Muppet Valentine Show*. It featured Mia Farrow as guest star, but failed to draw the kind of audience that would have caused network executives to break out the Mumm's. ABC persisted, however, and in 1975 broadcast another pilot, *The Muppet Show: Sex and Violence*.

Aside from the fact that it had no guest star, and that Kermit was not the host, this was very much the prototype for *The Muppet Show* series. The program began with Crazy Harry blowing up the titles, then the Electric Mayhem performed, Rowlf made a cameo appearance ("I used to be with Jimmy Dean. Nobody remembers me any more") and there was a science-fiction spoof—"Return to Beneath the Planet of the Pigs"—which featured close cousins of Link Hogthrob, Julius Strangepork and Miss Piggy herself.

Again, however, the ratings were not what the network had hoped for, and ABC informed Henson Associates that it was not prepared to make any commitment to a Muppet series. "Our pitch," says David Lazer, "for presenting the Muppet case to the

networks was that this was a family show, a show that would appeal to all age groups. The network didn't feel that it was possible for us to reach both children and adults." With ABC out of the picture, Henson Associates entered into discussions with CBS. CBS concurred with ABC's opinion. In the summer of 1975, however, Abe Mandell—head of ITC Entertainment, the American division of ACC, Lord Grade's entertainment corporation—wrote an enthusiastic letter to Jim Henson, expressing great interest in the potential of the Muppets. As Lord Grade himself recalls, Mandell had seen the second of the ABC pilots and had advised that ITC should make every effort to sign the Muppets for a syndicated series, pointing out that they would provide ideal fare for the prime-time access period, that slot from 7:30 to 8:00 p.m. which is not controlled by the networks. Mandell had had discussions with the executive officers of the five CBS-owned and -operated stations, each located in a major market, and had been given a clear indication that these stations were enthusiastic about carrying the Muppets in prime-time access. With those stations committed to a Muppet series, it could be taken for granted that others around the United States would follow. In the United Kingdom, *The Muppet Show* would be put out over the airwaves by Lord Grade's own ATV company.

From the beginning of Sam and Friends, Jane Henson—seen here with Kermit and Yorick—was active as a puppeteer and as her husband's partner in the development of the Muppets.

Syndication was still a dirty word at Henson Associates, but it was recognized that Lord Grade was no ordinary syndicator. Having graduated from being a musical-hall entertainer to being one of the most successful entrepreneurs in the entertainment industry, he was in a position to offer the same kind of production facilities and financial backing that could be expected from a major American network. With this in mind, Henson Associates' business arm—headed by David Lazer, Al Gottesman, executive vice president of Henson Associates, and Bernie Brillstein of the Bernie Brillstein Office, Henson Associates' management company—began serious negotiations with ITC. The one thing they were after, above all else, was an assurance that they would not be underfinanced. Lazer and Brillstein visited Mandell in his home and asked for a guarantee of a budget that would ensure high production values, along with a promise of creative independence. With Lord Grade's backing, Mandell agreed to both these requests. (By the fifth season the show costs in excess of $250,000 an episode to produce. The promise of creative freedom has been scrupulously adhered to.)

It was understood that the show would be a co-production of ITC and Henson Associates, and would be made at ATV's facilities in Borehamwood. The Henson creative team had come to the conclusion, in the wake of the *Sex and Violence* pilot, that a weekly guest star was essential to provide a bridge between the audience and the Muppet world. ITC was very much in accordance with this, feeling that guest stars would make the show easier to promote.

An agreement was reached, and early in the New Year—after taping a number of segments for *Saturday Night Live*—the Muppet performers, along with other creative personnel, arrived in England to make two pilot shows. ITC was in fact committed to a full season of twenty-four shows, but the pilots were needed to sell the Muppets to potential customers. A few months later, after taping more material for *Saturday Night Live*, the Muppet stock company moved *en masse* to London to produce the balance of the first season of shows.

Henson Associates' headquarters would still be located in New York, as would the main workshop where the major characters would be built. (This remains the case to this day.) A second workshop was to be set up at the studio, however, where characters needed at short notice could be constructed and the regulars could be

maintained, repaired and costumed. This shop would be staffed principally with experienced Muppet designers and builders from New York, some of whom would come to England on a semi-permanent basis, others on revolving short-term assignments.

"Moving so many people to another country, and getting everyone settled in there, was no easy matter," recalls David Lazer. "People were getting the bends. Just dealing with things like cars and accommodations was a big problem. We had no idea how long we'd be here. We had no idea if the show would be picked up. Then there was the element of culture shock. Some of our people had never been out of the country before. We were very lucky with the English crew, however. From the very first they thought that everything we did was hilariously funny, so that, of course, made everyone feel good."

The first season saw Jack Burns installed as producer and head writer of *The Muppet Show*. Burns was chosen because of his years of experience in prime-time television as producer, writer and performer (notably in the comedy team of Burns and Schreiber). Jim Henson took the title of executive producer for *The Muppet Show*, while David Lazer carried the same title on behalf of Henson Associates.

"Jack Burns was valuable to us that first year," says Jim Henson. "He has a quick comedy mind and we needed his experience. With Jerry Juhl, he began to give shape to many of the principal characters on the show. It was Jack, I think, who named Gonzo and who had that basic concept of a character who performs impossible stunts. Jack's humor is hard and has an edge to it. He came up with some wonderful gags. Jerry, on the other hand, is a former Muppet performer and has been with us for more than twenty years. He understands the Muppets from the inside. His strengths are character development and structure."

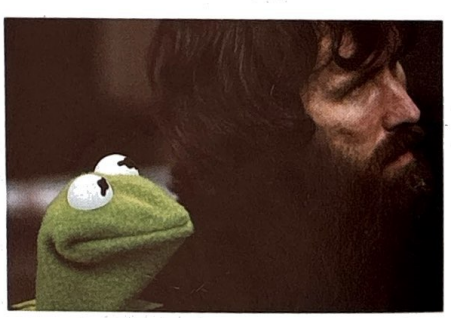
At the end of the first season Burns left the show and Henson became the producer, while Jerry Juhl took over as head writer and David Lazer was named executive producer for the show.

"The kind of comedy we do," says Jim Henson, "depends on being able to work in a certain atmosphere—it's something we work consciously to create. I've heard stories about other shows that thrive on the tension that exists between the stars, or between a star and the producers, but that wouldn't work for us. If we didn't manage to maintain a friendly atmosphere, we'd be in deep trouble. In the studio our floor manager, Richard Holloway, has been very important in creating that atmosphere. He knows how to keep things running smoothly without treading on anyone's toes. In the context of the operation as a whole, David Lazer is the person we rely on."

An executive producer's responsibilities involve everything from booking guest stars to looking after the small day-to-day details that are part of any business. Where *The Muppet Show* is concerned, however, there are some other and rather special responsibilities.

"When you book a guest star onto almost any other show," Lazer explains, "the star gets into his car in Beverly Hills, drives twenty minutes to the studio, does his day's work, then drives home again. Here we're in a rather different position. We are asking the guest to come to a foreign country and to spend several days working in what for him may be a completely unfamiliar environment. That makes him our guest in a very literal sense. It's one of my responsibilities to make sure that he is comfortable, and not just in the physical sense, though that's part of it too, of course. I have to make sure that he's comfortable working with us—that when he sees the show he feels we made

Above: Lord Lew Grade.
Opposite: In the Sesame Street studio, Jerry Nelson, Caroly Wilcox, Jim Henson, Frank Oz and Richard Hunt put a group of familiar characters through their paces.
Below: Kermit the Frog and Jim Henson.



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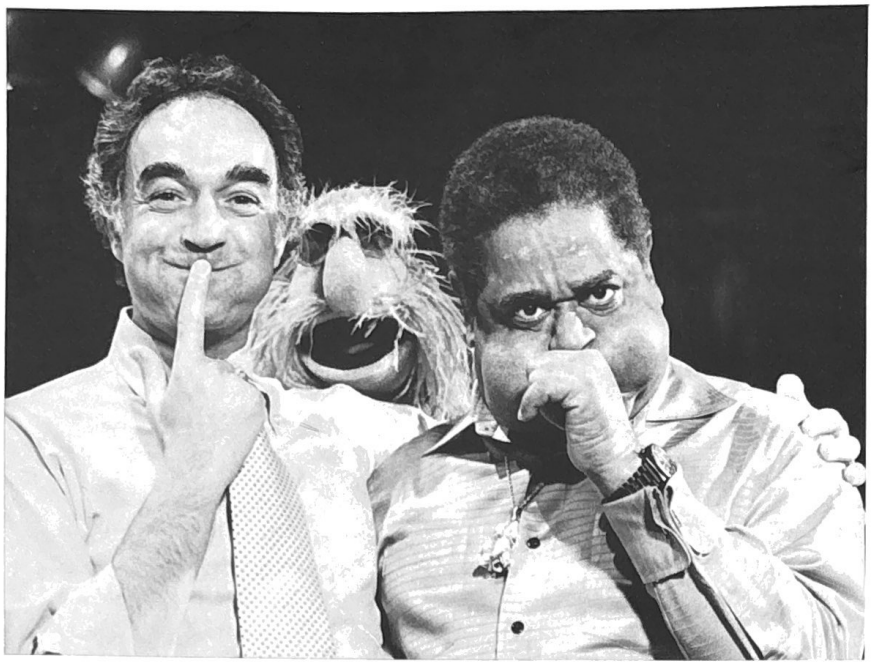
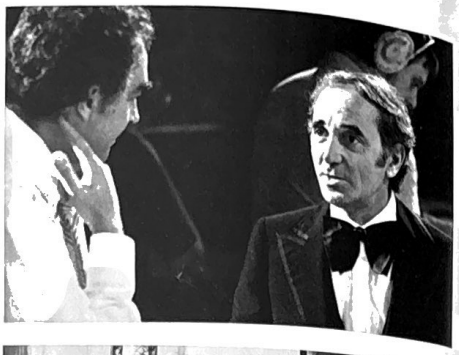




Above left: Executive producer David Lazer clowns with Floyd Pepper and trumpeter Dizzy Gillespie.
Top: Lazer with Charles Aznavour, center, Carol Burnett, bottom, singer Cleo Laine.

him look good. I think of each show as a special for the individual guest.

"Often the guest star arrives here alone, without a manager, and then I feel that it's my duty to serve as the guest's manager for as long as he or she is with us. I check that monitor—and Jim does too—to make absolutely sure that the makeup is perfect, that the guest looks good. Unless our guests go home telling everyone that they had a great time doing *The Muppet Show*, then I haven't done my job.

"Working with Jim Henson gives me certain unique responsibilities as well. Unlike other producers, he is also performing on the floor and staging every scene. Jim's an astute businessman and he knows everything that's going on in this company, but he just doesn't have time to attend to everything personally, so it's up to me to give him breathing space so he can run the creative side of the operation."

One of Lazer's problems during the first year was the fact that many stars were reluctant to do the show. "It's understandable, I suppose," he says. "Jim has always been respected in the business, so nobody actually laughed at us, but there were a lot of polite refusals. The point of view was 'A puppet show? . . . In prime-time access? . . . In England? . . .' We relied on friends, those first few months, and those friends really came through. Take someone like Lena Horne, for example. She never does television and people had told her the show was sure to bomb, but she believed in the Muppets and she did it. When the word got out that we had people like Lena, and Candy Bergen, and Peter Ustinov booked onto the show, then things really started to turn around."

Jane Henson reports that at the outset of the series the talk among the Muppet regulars was of a show that might run, if everything went well, for perhaps three years. "No matter how successful the show became—and no one expected it to be *this* successful—it was difficult to see how anyone could come up with enough fresh material to sustain a thirty-minute weekly puppet series for longer than that. The amount of work involved in a show like this is unbelievable. I don't think anyone

imagined we'd still be here five years later."

Coincidentally, Lord Grade says that he too was hoping for three good seasons. "If it had run that long," he says today, "I would have been delighted. I thought the show would do well, but I certainly did not anticipate that it would have the amazing success that it has had." To what does Lord Grade attribute this success? He points to the talents that exist in the Henson organization, but adds, "There's no accounting for this kind of success. It's a phenomenon, and that's all you can really say about it."

In Great Britain the success of the show was instantaneous. British viewers were bowled over by the novelty of the Muppets and the audaciousness of the concept. In the United States, where the audience perhaps shared some of the skepticism of the networks as to whether the show could bridge the gap between adults and children, the ratings built more gradually. It was only as the characters began to evolve and the format became more sophisticated that the series became a huge success.

"With a show like this," says Jane Henson, "the audience has to know the characters, and it takes time for the puppeteers to get to know them too. Working on a weekly series is a wonderful opportunity for the performers, very different from doing pilots or specials. Specials always seem to lack something. Jim and I had something like this with *Sam and Friends*, and the first couple of years of *Sesame Street*—when a lot of Muppet segments were being taped—was the same kind of experience for Frank and Jerry Nelson. *The Muppet Show* has given someone like Davey Goelz the opportunity to develop much faster than would otherwise be possible."

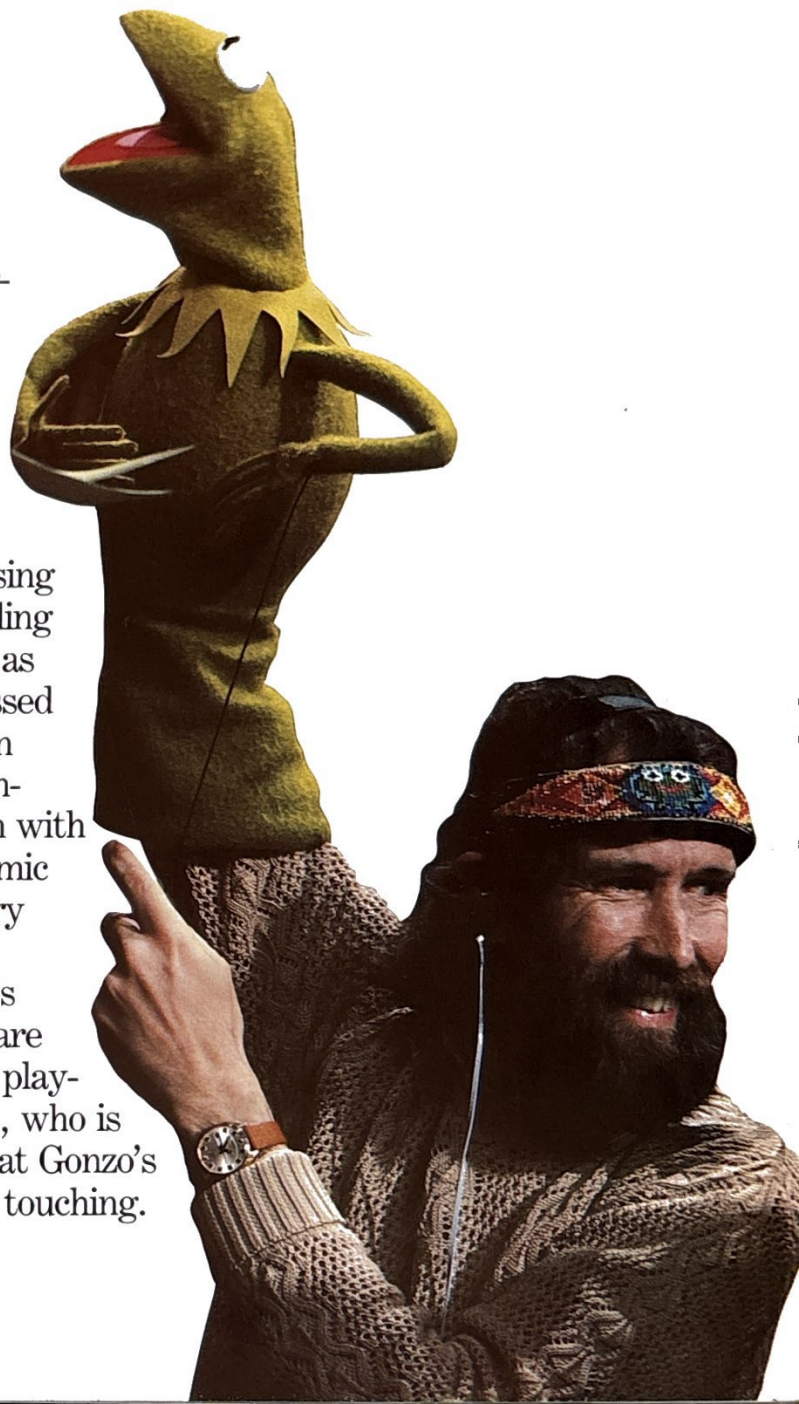
Clearly Jane Henson is making a crucial point when she says that the viewers' acceptance of the characters—who have become as real as the characters in any live-action show—is central to the success of the show. Jim Henson adds another thought.

"We set ourselves high standards," he says, "but essentially what we do around here is to try and amuse ourselves. Apparently what amuses us amuses a lot of other people too."

Guest stars Bernadette Peters, Candice Bergen, Peter Ustinov and Lena Horne in rehearsal for The Muppet Show.

3. A Frog's World

The Muppet Show confronts us with a universe of generally benign absurdity (characters may explode once in a while, or turn into chocolate layer cake, but they recover in time for the next performance). This is a Jabberwocky world in which what goes up does not necessarily come down, and, given that Newtonian physics are accorded such short shrift, it's hardly surprising that most of the puppet cast take the prevailing mayhem for granted and accept incongruity as the norm. In a single typical show, pigs dressed as Eskimos sing "Lullaby of Broadway" in an Arctic landscape, a seven-foot-tall carrot complains about having to share a dressing room with common or garden vegetables, and an epidemic of "rogue adhesive" places everyone in sundry sticky situations. Having survived invasions by herds of supercilious cattle, Crazy Harry's dynamite attacks and Fozzie Bear's threadbare jokes ("Thread*bear* jokes . . . Get it?"), the players are not fazed by anything, except Fozzie, who is fazed by everything. In this context the Great Gonzo's open predilection for chickens seems merely touching.



If we were to attempt a rational analysis of *The Muppet Show,* we should have to start by saying that it is, structurally speaking, a backstage drama punctuated by outlandish production numbers, or else it is a parody of a variety show frequently interrupted by backstage shenanigans. On the other hand, it might be passed off as the concept of a Douanier Rousseau of the Ozarks who happened to read a copy of Eugène Ionesco's *Rhinoceros* accidently left in his shack by a VISTA volunteer. Or it could be thought of as a docu-drama about a mental institution in which the inmates are encouraged to act out their neuroses while disguised as animals, vegetables or whatever happens to take their fancy.

A rational analysis hardly seems in order, though, since this is a show in which the principals include a harried frog, a *zoftig* pig with windswept hair and a mastery of karate that would have won the admiration of the late Bruce Lee, a bear with ears that waggle, a piano-playing dog with a bent for philosphic doggerel, a hook-nosed disciple of Evel Knievel, a boomerang fish-thrower, and the jaded impresario of a band of malicious infants. The resident band features a drummer who could find gainful employment as an attack dog, and guest stars must expect to contend with characters who are turning into chickens or inexplicably smitten with an inability to speak anything but pidgin Swedish.

To borrow a phrase from *Monty Python's Flying Circus,* one of the few television productions that have been informed by some of the same guiding principles that govern *The Muppet Show,* we seem to be confronted with "the strange case of the end of civilization as we know it," and perhaps it is this that gives the show its basic appeal. By comparison with happenings in the Muppet Theater, the everyday world seems almost sane.

The first edition of *The Muppet Show* to be taped, which featured Juliet Prowse as the guest star, was (at least by the show's own later standards) a relatively sedate affair. Certainly germs of the madness that would eventually take over were already present and in evidence, but a casual viewer might have thought that there was a fighting chance of preventing pandemic insanity.

During the opening theme Fozzie Bear told one of the jokes that killed vaudeville (the one that ends, "Sure it's an old joke, but it was an old panhandler"). Gonzo hit a gong, which exploded, then Fozzie told more antediluvian gags, while Statler and Waldorf heckled from their box and Kermit flirted with a chorus girl named Roxanne. Unseen by the television audience, which heard only the boos and jeers that greeted his performance, Gonzo ate a tire to the accompaniment of "The Flight of the Bumblebee." Two cowlike characters called Snowths performed a close-harmony duet while attempting to ignore the interruptions of a wild-eyed creature yelling "Mahnamanah." The guest star, after remarking to Kermit that this is the first time she has had to share a dressing room with a man who eats tires, danced in a moonlit glade with a herd of leaping gazelles. A cowboy sketch was brought to a premature close by an exploding apple. (Seconds later a cigar blew up in Statler's face.) At the climax of the show, the Muppet Glee Club, conducted by a tuxedoed Kermit, sang "Temptation" with Miss Piggy providing the lead vocal and seizing the opportunity to bend the lyrics into a heartfelt expression of her affection for the frog, thus inaugurating one of the great one-sided affairs of our times.

At this stage Miss Piggy was a relatively minor featured player—it would be more than a year before she would emerge as an authentic superstar—but this is just one way in which the fledgling *Muppet Show* differed from later editions. There were some

Scenes from various editions of The Muppet Show, *including those starring Gilda Radner (above, right) and Juliet Prowse, below.*

Above: Dr. Julius Strangepork, Captain Link Hogthrob and First Mate Piggy at the controls of the Swinetrek, Rita Moreno with Animal, and a gripping scene from "Bear on Patrol."
Left: Even more gripping, Liza Minelli as a dance-hall girl embraces Kermit, a tough-guy private eye.

signs of anarchy backstage—Muppy bit Kermit—but the action there never threatened to degenerate into out-and-out chaos. The production numbers were imaginative but modest in scope and restrained in concept.

The hallmark of *The Muppet Show* in its mature form—if the word "mature" can be said to apply—is that everything is taken to its illogical conclusion. That was not always the case in the early days. The first shows were full of wonderful things, but the momentum of the later editions—which is like the momentum of a runaway Winnebago on Pike's Peak—had not yet manifested itself.

This is hardly surprising. Given the novelty of the show, it is remarkable that the initial framework proved so serviceable. Of the regular *Muppet Show* features, only "At the Dance," reminiscent of *Laugh-In's* party segment, appeared in Show One. The Swedish Chef and "Muppet News" made their debuts in the second show with guest star Connie Stevens. "Veterinarian's Hospital," that sudsiest of soap operas, was introduced during the fifth week of taping, the edition of the show for which Rita Moreno was awarded an Emmy. "Pigs in Space," destined to give Miss Piggy so much valuable exposure, did not become part of the show till the second season. "Bear on Patrol" appeared still later.

Gradually, beginning the second year, the format began to evolve toward theme shows and even full-blown "book" shows, such as the Robin Hood episode (with Lynn Redgrave) and the private-eye parody (with Liza Minnelli). The slow evolution can be explained, in part, by the complexity of the elements that were there to be juggled with. In the course of a typical half-hour of *The Muppet Show,* the viewer encounters an actual human (the guest star), human-like puppets (such as the Swedish Chef, or Statler and Waldorf), animal puppets with human attributes (like Link Hogthrob),

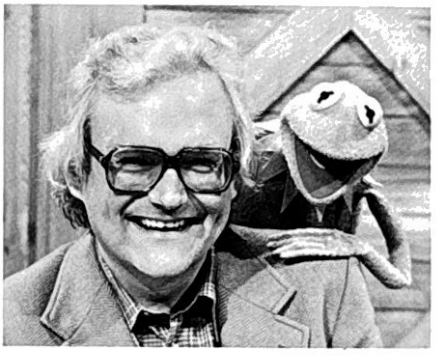
The Swedish Chef, shown at top in his kitchen with an argumentative chocolate cake, began life as this rough sketch by Jim Henson, who also built the puppet. The Chef is performed by Jim and Frank Oz together in a masterpiece of dual manipulation.

Left: Miss Piggy's pet, Foo-Foo, exists in two distinct versions. The one at the right of this picture is a real dog, the other a puppet manipulated by Steve Whitmire. Or is it the other way around? Below: Head writer, Jerry Juhl, with Kermit.

animal puppets with purely animal attributes (one version of Foo-Foo), actual animals (the other Foo-Foo), talking statues, talking food and creatures such as Gonzo and Scooter who are of indeterminate provenance. (In an ad-lib exchange on the backstage set Kermit/Jim Henson turns to Scooter/Richard Hunt and asks, "What are you anyway?" "My mother was a parrot," Scooter replies. "We don't know about my father. It was during the war." "Really?" says Kermit. "Which side was he on?")

These varied characters are given the opportunity to interact in a completely novel way. The show is carefully scripted and staged, but it is never totally tied down to pre-planned notions because the art of puppetry, as practiced by the Muppet performers, always allows for a degree of extemporization. Last-minute adjustments can be made right on the set. Voice tracks are pre-recorded for some musical numbers, but mostly the voices of the Muppet characters are performed live—that is to say, the puppeteer speaks his lines into a microphone while the puppet above his head "lip-synchs" the words. This means that changes can be made even when a take is in progress, and there is an evident spontaneity about *The Muppet Show* that could be achieved in no other way. Miss Piggy can be made to alter her delivery just as a live actress would.

The puppets can interact as flexibly as live performers because, in a very real sense, they *are* live performers, and it is precisely this that has permitted the writers, in close collaboration with the ensemble of puppeteers, to develop such a sophisticated approach to television comedy. "What we do," emphasizes head writer Jerry Juhl, a longtime Henson associate, "is character comedy." Despite the plethora of bad puns, sight gags and surrealistic situations encountered weekly on the show, Juhl's contention is obviously true. Certainly Gonzo's stunts are funny in and of themselves, but the audience would probably have tired of them if Gonzo had not shown himself capable of evolving as a personality. Like most of the regulars, Gonzo came to the show as a virtually new character and has had to grow up on screen. Only a couple of these regulars—Kermit and Rowlf, both performed by Jim Henson—were clearly established characters when the show began.



Without Kermit it is doubtful that the show would have lasted long enough for any of the new characters to show what they were capable of. He provides the glue that holds everything else together. In the *Sex and Violence* pilot a character called Nigel

The indefatigable Richard Hunt brings the indefatigable Scooter to life.

was tried out in the host's role, but he proved unequal to the task, and when the series began, Kermit was called on because, as Jim Henson explains, "I just felt comfortable with him."

It is a commonplace around Studio D to say that Henson functions on the studio floor as Kermit does around the Muppet Theater, but this is an oversimplification. There is a lot of Henson in Kermit, but their personalities are not, strictly speaking, interchangeable. What might be more accurate is to say that Kermit is a character that Henson has pieced together from aspects of his own personality (some of them submerged).

Jerry Juhl, who probably knows Kermit as well as anyone but Henson, says that the frog is deceptively difficult to write for, unexpectedly complex. People tend to think Kermit is just a straight man, but Juhl insists that this is far from being the case. "He is much more than that. He relates to the other characters on many different levels. More important, they *have* to relate to him. Without Kermit, they don't work. Nothing could happen without him. The other characters do not have what it takes to hold things together. Kermit does have that ability, but at the same time he understands the others, he cares for them. On one show the guest remarked to Kermit that he was the only character around who was not crazy. 'Me not crazy?' Kermit said. 'I hired the others!' That's one of my favorite lines. The fact is that Kermit loves anarchy but is able to impose just enough discipline to stop things from falling apart. No one else can help him because none of the other characters knows how. That's why he gets frazzled, because it all comes down to him. It takes a lot to push him over the edge, but it does happen once in a while. On the Peter Sellers show, for example, he just gave up, went out on stage and sang 'It's Not Easy Being Green.' I think that was a very moving moment. Then there was the show when Piggy leaked a story to the papers saying that she and Kermit had been secretly married in Las Vegas. Kermit went out of control, completely lost his temper and fired Piggy on the spot. I think Jim enjoyed doing that. It was all the more effective because basically Kermit is quite gentle. He likes to make his wisecracks and to get in his little digs, but the audience knows that he cares for the other characters. He is the one who has given them their chance. Without him, the show couldn't exist."

On the studio floor Jim Henson is low-keyed, unflappable, receptive, generous in that he is always open to suggestion. Kermit is excitable, far from unflappable and often unreceptive; but he is generous. Everything that happens in the Muppet Theater is an act of self-sacrifice on Kermit's part. At the same time Kermit is no martyr. He uses the situation he has created as a vehicle to express his feelings about the world. Operating Kermit as a kind of surrogate self, Henson can give vent to frustration and anger. Kermit can deliver the kind of snarky remark and offhand insult that Henson—given his responsibilities—could never make in real life. He readily admits to the pleasure he took in letting Kermit lose his temper in the episode built around Piggy's leak to the press and says that Kermit has certainly become more frenetic as the show has progressed. Without presuming any deep psychological insight, it may be that Kermit is an important reason why Jim Henson can appear so calm under the pressure of producing a weekly television show.

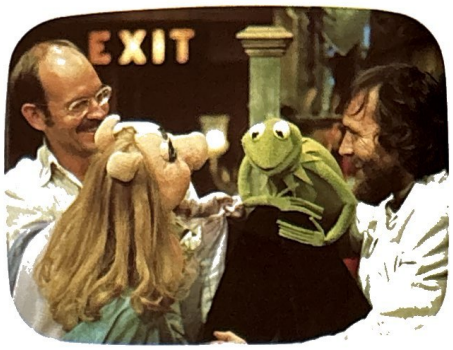
Presumably, like Kermit, the typical viewer of *The Muppet Show* has a taste for anarchy, otherwise he would switch to another channel. At same time, though, that viewer—again like Kermit—draws the line at a point short of out-and-out mayhem. Many of the characters in Kermit's orbit are completely out of control, the victims of their own obsessions. Kermit, while he is no saint, has achieved a wonderful equilibrium in which common sense and a hunger for the absurd are nicely balanced. Were he to represent common sense only, he would be a prig; if he represented only hunger for the absurd, he would be just another of the show's eccentrics. It is the fact that he has managed to embrace both extremes that enables him to function as he does.

It was the emerging dynamic between Miss Piggy and Kermit that gave the show its greatest boost. Developed from the group of pigs made for the *Sex and Violence* pilot, Miss Piggy began her show-business career as a member of the chorus, a minor featured player at best, though her affection (not to say lust) for Kermit was established from the outset. Throughout the first season she remained a secondary character, but something was happening, a chemical reaction that nobody had anticipated and for which nobody can claim complete responsibility.

Certainly it was Frank Oz's virtuosity and energy that brought her to life, yet once she had been given the gift of life she grabbed for the strings of destiny with both lavender-begloved fists and all the not inconsiderable gusto at her disposal. Nobody—no human agency—decided that Piggy should be groomed for superstardom. It was *she* who determined that stardom was her right and that she would achieve it, no matter what the cost.

This is not put forward as a whimsical idea. To bring a puppet to life, that puppet must be given a personality, and that personality becomes a self-contained and self-sustaining entity. Unless the puppeteer, the writers and everybody else concerned with the show adheres to the behavior patterns dictated by that personality, the character will not ring true on screen. In Miss Piggy, Frank Oz and the writers created a character who passionately wanted to be a star; having done so, they had to give her the opportunity to prove herself. Had she failed, she would have slipped back to being a secondary figure, an object of ridicule. As things worked out—while she does not escape ridicule entirely—she has proved that she has the ego and willpower to overcome all odds.

Miss Piggy is not an easy character to perform and Frank Oz has had to stretch his talents to keep up with her. When it became evident that she was becoming a force to be reckoned with, he wrote down—for himself and the writers—a brief account of



Above: For the benefit of the still cameraman, Frank Oz and Jim Henson stage a confrontation between Miss Piggy and Kermit. Opposite: Jim Henson watches the monitor while Kermit, poised in his director's chair, faces the camera.

Her wardrobe equal to any occasion, Miss Piggy shows what the well-dressed backpacker is wearing this year.

her life prior to her arrival on *The Muppet Show.* The gist of this biographical document, as described by Oz for *The New York Times Magazine,* June 10, 1979, is that "she grew up in a small town; her father died when she was young; her mother wasn't that nice to her. She had to enter beauty contests to survive. She has a lot of aggressiveness, but she needs a lot to survive—as many single women do. She has a lot of vulnerability, which she has to hide, because of her need to be a superstar." Oz spoke in that same article of an incident on set that helped define Piggy's character in his own mind.

"I was working as Miss Piggy with Jim, who was doing Kermit, and the script called for her to slap him. Instead of a slap, I gave him a funny karate hit. Somehow, that hit crystallized her character for me—the coyness hiding the aggression; the conflict of that love with her desire for a career; her hunger for a glamour image; her tremendous out-and-out ego. . . ."

Miss Piggy has become real in the same sense that a character in a novel becomes real, and—just as what happens to the heroine of a satisfying novel seems somehow inevitable—Piggy has had to accept her destiny with all its consequences, both good and bad. Given her small-town background and her hunger for glamour, we might

plausibly describe her as the Emma Bovary of our day.

Miss Piggy's rise to fame has been the stuff that legends are made of. The Great Gonzo's emergence has been more gradual, but nonetheless significant. Piggy, now that she has come into her own, lends the show her star energy. What Gonzo brings to the show is soul, for Gonzo is all soul. His sincere lunacy is the essence of Muppet sublimity. When he announces that he will catch a cannonball with his bare hands, he means it quite literally; no illusionism is involved. When he hypnotizes himself so that he can support a 5,000-pound weight, he sets aside all possible consequences. His art comes before everything except, perhaps, true love. Gonzo is nothing if not passionate, and if the right chicken should come along, he would, like Van Gogh, gladly cut off an ear (if only he had an ear to cut off).

No biography of Gonzo is extant, but it is rumored that his mother, when she was with child, spent a good deal of time in the Nevada desert admiring the spectacular sunsets that followed nuclear tests. Gonzo is a mutant who glories in his own grotesqueness. When he explains, during the course of one show, that he believes in reincarnation, and is asked what he is coming back as next time, his response is immediate and cogent: "Who cares? I don't know what I am *this* time." Such affirmations of life are typical of Gonzo and, whatever he is, he displays considerable aplomb allied to a healthy libido.

Jane Henson explains that it was felt from the beginning that Dave Goelz would be able to do something interesting with Gonzo. "Davey has a special sense of humor, so it was just a matter of time." Until Gonzo evolved, along with Dave Goelz, however, the writers tended to treat him as a vaudeville cliché, a purveyor of ludicrous feats, generally performed off camera to hearty jeers. But, like Piggy (and probably with less equivocation), Gonzo believed in himself. He dismissed the audience as being made up of "peasants" and this led to backstage dialogues that gave him the opportunity to become a factor in the intellectual life of *The Muppet Show*. As Dave Goelz learned to plumb the depths of Gonzo's soul, as he learned how to exploit each tic of the character's subtly expressive features, so Gonzo took on a kind of heroic—if somewhat twisted—dignity. The writers began to provide him with material that was delicately shaded to reveal every nuance of his warped aspirations and epic gullibility. Gonzo always possessed self-confidence, and as the show progressed, he developed a certain *savoir-faire*, synthetic perhaps, but none the less charming for that.

"In the beginning," Dave Goelz recalls, "Gonzo was pretty much a 'down' character. His natural expression is kind of 'down.' Toward the end of the first season we were doing a scene on the backstage set and Jim said, 'We need more energy from Gonzo.' For some reason I over-reacted—it was just one of those things that happen on set—and Gonzo got a big laugh. That began to crystallize something for me. Between seasons, back in New York, I built a new Gonzo with an eye mechanism that enabled him to look excited. That helped me develop the 'up' side of Gonzo's character, and Jerry Juhl and the other writers picked up on it. Then there was a moment during the second season when I had Gonzo ad-lib a line that was, I think, important for my understanding of his character. He'd been auditioning chickens for the show—dancing chickens—and they were all terrible. At the end of the scene I had him turn to the camera and say, 'Nice legs, though.' Something jelled right there. It told me something about him."

Gonzo was never exactly a stereotype—what could he be a stereotype of?—but he has evolved from a somewhat two-dimensional figure into one of the two or three

For a nightclub scene, Dave Goelz manages both the Great Gonzo and Camilla the chicken, Gonzo's close personal friend.

Above: After a difficult first season, Fozzie Bear grew into one of The Muppet Show's most endearing and enduring personalities.
Left: As is clear from this picture, the Great Gonzo will do anything to justify the sobriquet he has bestowed upon himself.

most complex characters on the show, a creature who has been enriched by his weird and variegated experiences. When, during the fourth season, he announced his intention of quitting the Muppet Theater for movie stardom, he was able to inspire one of the few moments of genuine pathos in recent television history.

On an empty stage, a sports coat draped over one drooping shoulder, Gonzo faced his faithful audience—the "peasants" of yesteryear—for the last time (supposedly) and crooned (or croaked, rather) "I Did It My Way," a moving musical farewell that ended with Gonzo, in tears, being led offstage by Kermit. Happily, of course, Old Buzzard Beak revoked his decision and was back on the show the following week.

Like Cary Grant in his early days at Paramount, Gonzo has teetered for some time on the brink of superstardom. (He is an accomplished teeterer.) In his own estimation, it goes without saying, he is a superstar already, so there is little danger of success going to his head. He will remain forever the same egotistical, sincere, harebrained, winsome masochist, no matter what the future has in store for him.

Fozzie Bear was conceived of as being Kermit's primary foil on *The Muppet Show*, but this was not to be. Perhaps Fozzie's insecurity was just a shade too feverish for such a responsibility. Frank Oz has a way of pushing his characters to their limits, and in the case of Fozzie this proved to be a little unnerving. In any case, the pig just *demanded* to have co-star billing and Fozzie could not hope to compete against that kind of willpower. Fozzie is not a disciple of Nietzsche. If he is a disciple of anyone—and there is some possibility that he does not know the meaning of the word "disciple"—it is Henny Youngman.

"Our original concept of Fozzie," says Jerry Juhl, "was a mistake. He was a bad comedian and nothing more, and there was no way of making that enjoyable. Fozzie did help make Statler and Waldorf because he was good to heckle, but what we did to him in those first few shows was terrible. We just humiliated the poor guy. We sensed that Piggy was emerging, but that was a slow process and we didn't quite know what was happening for a while, so we had to persevere with Fozzie, but it took a long while to make him work. In the second half of the first season there was a show in which Fozzie persuaded Kermit to be his straight man and they got into a kind of 'Who's on First' routine, with each misunderstanding the other's lines. That was funny and I think that was when we realized that he could work if we concentrated on his relationships with the other characters. In that context he could be touching rather than just pathetic."

Released from his original responsibilities, the bear came into his own. Fozzie is capable of misunderstanding anything he is told, which provides the writers with all kinds of fertile options.

After the humiliations he suffered in the early shows, Fozzie was permitted his moments of triumph—as when he managed to convince Kermit of the existence of his writer, the legendary "Gags" Beasly—and, by comparison with the audience at least, some of the backstage crew are almost appreciative of his sense of humor. Scooter, for example, has been known to swap one-liners with Fozzie and it's possible to imagine them palling around together on their own time, perusing the jokes in back numbers of *Reader's Digest* or watching re-runs of *Gilligan's Island*.

Kermit, Piggy, Gonzo and Fozzie have become the key characters, the personalities who have contributed most to the development of the show as a para-human comedy. One other character, Scooter, has an important role to play in the backstage drama, but he operates on a slightly different plane from these four. Scooter is more self-

Above left: Rowlf the Dog might well have been given a much larger role in The Muppet Show had Jim Henson not been so preoccupied with Kermit. Above: Beauregard, the klutzy stagehand, is an example of a character who, although he was regarded with affection, taxed the ingenuity of the show's writers. Below: A Michael Frith sketch for Beauregard.

contained, he does not share their desperate hunger for success, perhaps because (given that his uncle owns the theater) he knows that he will have his day.

Many other characters—Link, Strangepork, the Chef, Bunson, Beaker and so on—are used mostly, though not exclusively, in sketches and production numbers. A special word, though, should be said for the musicians of the Electric Mayhem, without whom the Muppet Theater would be a very different place. They are the show's outsiders who hang out in the Muppet world because "it's a good gig." They contribute much to the musical flavor of the show, and they are responsible in large part for the prevailing spirit of iconoclasm. Floyd in particular, as the most verbal of the group, serves a very specific purpose. His laid-back hipsterism is always slightly at odds with the endeavors of Kermit and the other central characters. He lends perspective to happenings in the Muppet Theater because he does not quite belong.

Certain other characters, according to Jerry Juhl, have not been given the opportunity to live up to their full potential on the show. Rowlf, for example, has seldom been used in backstage situations because he is one of Jim Henson's characters and, backstage, Henson is preoccupied with Kermit.

"I have no doubt," says Juhl, "that Rowlf could have been one of the stars of the show if only we could have had him interacting on a regular basis with Kermit and Piggy. He's a wonderfully down-to-earth character and there's so much we could have done with him but, from a practical point of view, it just wasn't possible. In the same way, it would have been great to develop a relationship between Fozzie and Piggy, but we couldn't do that because they're both Frank's characters. You can do these things in the movies, of course, but that's not quite the same as letting them develop in a weekly series."

Dave Goelz feels that, of all his characters, Beauregard, the stagehand, is the one he knows the best, yet he has never evolved into a major figure.

"Bo is very similar to a character I performed in *Emmet Otter's Jug-Band Christmas*. His name was Wendel Porcupine and I had a lot of fun with him. Bo was sort of modeled after him. He's big and strong and clumsy—I love him—but he's

Above left: Zoot the saxophonist, Floyd Pepper and Janice: charter members of the Electric Mayhem Band.
Above: Prying reporter Fleet Scribbler, a headache for Kermit . . . and The Muppet Show's writing staff.

passive, we've never found a 'hook' for him. If you take Gonzo, on the other hand, he has an obvious 'hook.' Everything he does is inappropriate. That gives the writers plenty of active choices, and that leads to comedy."

David Odell, one of the writers, suggested to Goelz that the problem with Beauregard is that he has no desires, he doesn't want anything. Jerry Juhl concurs with this, adding, "He's such a wonderful puppet, and such a wonderful character, I still feel that we could do something with him. It may just be that he doesn't work within the context of the Muppet Theater. Perhaps if we could get him into another situation we could find something for him to desire."

If Beauregard is an example of a character who might work, given more time, many others have been total failures. "I have the feeling," says Jim Henson, "that Frank Oz could take any puppet, unless he had a complete block about it, and turn it into a star. He's that good and he has the ability to make the characters sympathetic. Mostly, though, you have to count on finding just the right match between character and puppeteer, the match that sparks the performer to add to what's in the script." Jerry Juhl agrees, adding, "Sometimes the writing is at fault too. Whatever the case, you can generally tell right away, within a couple of shows. You just know it's not going to work."

Some characters fail because they are basically unsympathetic. "On our show," says Henson, "even the villains have to be sympathetic. Scooter's uncle, J. P. Grosse, was a good concept so long as we didn't see him, but when we introduced him in person he was just too harsh. You didn't want to have him around." Jerry Juhl recalls a similar instance, one which caused the show's writers considerable embarrassment. "At the beginning of the second season we had a big reception for the English press. There was a tremendous turnout and lots of champagne and we chose this occasion to introduce a new character—Fleet Scribbler, a very aggressive reporter—whom we had written into the show. Naturally the newspaper writers loved him and they splashed him all over the front pages of the tabloids. As soon as we began working with Fleet, we realized that he was simply abrasive and awful. We just wanted to get rid of him right

Season

Juliet Prowse

Lena Horne

Joel Grey

Peter Ustinov

Phyllis Diller

Vincent Price

Twiggy

Bruce Forsyth

Florence Henderson

Valerie Harper

Jim Nabors

Paul Williams

I

Harvey Korman

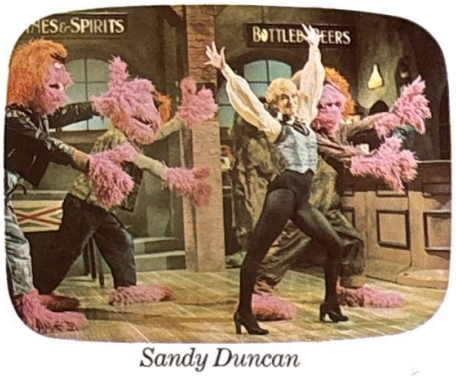
Candice Bergen

Avery Schreiber

Rita Moreno

Ethel Merman

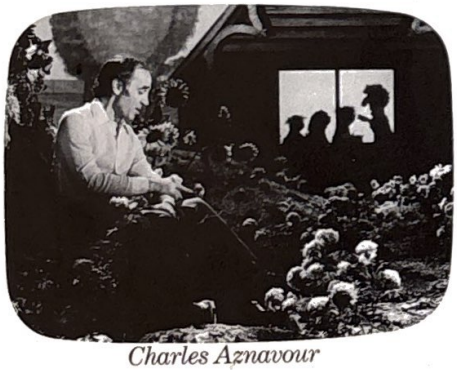
Connie Stevens



Sandy Duncan

Ben Vereen

Kaye Ballard



Charles Aznavour

Ruth Buzzi

Mummenschanz

away, but there'd been all this publicity, so we tried to stay with him for several weeks until we could drop him without anyone noticing."

A later disappointment was Betsy Bird, a huge cousin of *Sesame Street's* Big Bird, who was created with a considerable expenditure of time and effort. It had been hoped that Betsy Bird would be a vehicle for the eccentric dancing of Betsy Baytos, and the bird did work quite effectively in production numbers, but it failed to develop as a character in the overall context of the show. "There were some design problems," Henson explains. Betsy Baytos was fine, but "the costume tended to disguise her movements rather than exaggerate them. If I had that figure to build again, I would not have the head built up high above the shoulders the way it was. If the head had been lower—at a normal head height—it would have emphasized the length of the legs and made the movement much more effective. But the main problem was that we didn't find a handle for the character. That's always the real problem."

In a sense, the characters who haven't worked have made their own contribution to the show in that they enhance the overall feeling of reality. The abrasive presence of Fleet Scribbler, in his few appearances, helped define some of the characteristics of the regular members of the troupe. (By seeing how Kermit responds to an unpleasant representative of the yellow press, we know something new about Kermit.)

"Writing a show like this," says Jerry Juhl, "has been fascinating. A character begins as a name on the page, then one day you give it two lines of throwaway dialogue and for some reason there's a spark on the set and you see all kinds of possibilities that weren't there before. You're involved in endless cycles of growth."

Above: Under the supervision of Caroly Wilcox, assisted by Cheryl Blalock, the Betsy Bird costume is built in the New York workshop and fitted on dancer Betsy Baytos. Opposite: Betsy Bird in action. Below: A sketch for Betsy Bird.

4. Muppet Anatomy

At the outset of his television career Jim Henson built his own puppets, and when time allows, he still likes to keep his hand in at the workbench. (Of the *Muppet Show* regulars, in addition to Kermit, he built the prototypes of the Swedish Chef and Gonzo, the latter being thrown together in a couple of hours when the Muppet builders were devising a group of monsters.) As early as the days of *Sam and Friends*, however, he reached a point where it became obvious that his performing and production responsibilities would soon make it necessary for him to seek assistance in the workshop. In 1960 he met the late Don Sahlin, who was then working with Burr Tillstrom. Sahlin began by lending Henson a hand with puppet-building, but soon became a full-time member of the organization and, for a little over a decade, built almost all the Muppets. Generally Henson would give him a sketch—little more than a scribble in some instances—to indicate the kind of character that was needed, and Sahlin would take over.

Above: Master puppet builder Don Sahlin trying to look sinister in the midst of a mass of monsters, and working on a Muppet head in the New York workshop.
Below: Some Michael Frith sketches for an unnamed character.

What made him invaluable was his ability to give these sketches substance without losing sight of the essential simplicity that had made the Muppets effective in the first place. In this way Rowlf, Ernie, Bert, Cookie Monster and many other characters came into being.

While Henson and Sahlin brought many technical refinements to the art of puppetry, the type of puppet they created—and this is equally true of the work of later Muppet designers—was basically traditional, relying on principles that have been in use for hundreds and even thousands of years. Several factors make them different from earlier puppets, however, and the most important of these is that the design sense that governs their appearance is highly personal and distinctive and specifically adapted to the needs of the television medium. It was, then, Don Sahlin's sensibility, as much as his skill, which made him a key figure in the Muppet organization.

Because of the demands of the medium, Muppets are—with few exceptions—extremely flexible so they can be made to be more expressive in close-ups. Contributing to this flexibility is the use of new materials, such as Styrofoam and synthetic pile fabrics. Synthetic dyes also contribute to the character of the Muppets by producing colors that are especially effective on the phospher-dot screen. Subtleties of construction are numerous, but one very basic example that might be cited is the so-called "Henson stitch." Most Muppets are sewn together (though some, like Miss Piggy, now have molded heads). If they were being used in a conventional puppet-theater context, seams would be unimportant, but in a television close-up normal seams would be glaringly obvious. For this reason, at Jim Henson's urging, Don Sahlin devised a kind of stitch which produced an almost invisible seam.

Aside from flexibility, Muppet builders always aim for lightness and strength. Since the Muppet performers work with their arms above their heads for long periods of time, every ounce counts, and, given that the Muppets themselves are subjected to all kinds of physical indignity, durability is an important consideration.

Muppets come in many sizes. The smallest of the regular characters on *The Muppet Show* is Rizzo Rat. Rizzo is about eleven inches tall and is a rod puppet; that is to say,

he is operated from beneath (by Steve Whitmire) by means of metal rods which control all his motor functions, which are rather basic. Rizzo's head, for instance, can pivot from side to side on the axis of his neck, but cannot be tilted up and down in a nodding motion. (As designer Franz "Faz" Fazakas points out, this limitation gives Rizzo a more rat-like manner.)

From head to toe, Kermit is approximately two feet tall. Essentially he is the most basic sort of hand puppet with additional rod controls. Kermit's head and torso are a kind of padded elbow-length glove. Jim Henson's right hand fits inside Kermit's head, the thumb in the lower jaw, and operates the frog's head and mouth movements. Kermit's head is extremely simple in construction and very flexible so that Henson can scrunch it up in all kinds of ways, and it is this flexibility that makes the frog's features so expressive. Kermit's arms (and legs when necessary) are controlled from below by thin metal rods that are almost invisible on screen. Normally Henson will handle one or two of these rods with his left hand, to operate Kermit's arms. When certain limb movements are called for—as when Kermit is seated and has to cross and uncross his legs—a second puppeteer assists by working with another set of rods.

About the same size as Kermit, and operated in the same way, are puppets like Floyd Pepper who differ from the frog in that the design of their heads is somewhat less basic, making them considerably less flexible. These make up the largest single class of Muppet used on *The Muppet Show.* Kermit, of course, usually wears nothing but a collar, whereas Floyd and most *Muppet Show* regulars generally work in costume, costume which helps to define character. The main difference between Kermit and these others, however, is in the head construction. Kermit's head is little more than a mitten with Ping-Pong balls for eyes. Floyd Pepper's head—like that of Gonzo, for example, or Animal—is a good deal more elaborate.

Essentially a puppet's head must be conceived in such a way as to express different reactions and emotions when presented in different ways. Thus, held at one angle, it may appear to register apprehension, while, posed at another angle, even though no physical change has occurred, it may seem to register satisfaction.

Working with a television monitor, Jerry Nelson, manipulating Floyd, can adjust these angles rather precisely. The mouth of the Muppet gives him another expressive element with which to work. Depending upon the context, an open mouth may signify laughter or astonishment; a closed mouth may be made to represent distaste or determination. Certain Muppets are also provided with movable eyes, eyelids, brows or ears—operated by rods or other mechanical devices—and these too add to the range of expression available to the puppeteer.

Miss Piggy is a hand-and-rod puppet, differing from the general run only in that she is somewhat larger than most, and more padded. Roughly the same size as Piggy, but somewhat different in construction, are "live hand" puppets like Fozzie and Rowlf. When Jim Henson operates Rowlf, he places his right hand inside the dog's head, which is of very simple design, and his left arm *inside* Rowlf's left arm. Rowlf's paws are simply gloves, so no rods are needed to operate them; the gloves have fingers into which the puppeteer's fingers are inserted, enabling Rowlf to pick up objects just as a man would. Rowlf's body is constructed like a furry hood which can be draped over Henson's head to help conceal him from the camera. Sometimes a second puppeteer joins Henson under the hood to operate Rowlf's right paw. This is what enables the character to play the piano so convincingly.

Considerably larger than Rowlf are Muppets such as Sweetums that are operated

Above: One of Jim Henson's early sketches for Animal. Below: Rizzo Rat in a predicament.

by puppeteers who are literally inside the character. These figures are a kind of hybrid, not so much true puppets as costumes to which a puppet head has been attached. The puppeteer sees out through a carefully concealed scrim and works the mouth with any of various hand and rod devices. The eyes, if necessary, can be operated by remote control. These creatures are sometimes half again as tall as the puppeteer inside.

Largest of all are Muppets like the fifteen-foot-tall Bossmen—oddly emaciated creatures that seem to have been created from giant pipecleaners and are operated, with rods, by black-clad puppeteers who, when the scene is lit properly, are invisible against a black background.

Muppets, in fact, take advantage of most of the techniques developed by puppetmakers through the ages. None of the major characters, it is true, is a marionette (that is to say, a puppet operated from above by strings), though marionettes do appear on the show from time to time. Muppets are, primarily, sophisticated hand and/or rod puppets which the Muppet performers have learned to deploy in a highly original and imaginative way.

Don Sahlin died in 1978, but by then, as the Muppet workshop expanded, a whole new generation of designers and craftsmen who had absorbed his influence was ready to take up the slack. The New York workshop, under the direction of Caroly Wilcox, who has been with Henson Associates since the beginnings of *Sesame Street*, is a two-story complex in the company's headquarters on East 69th Street. In contrast with the chaos of the Elstree workshop—which has to contend with moment-to-moment crises, visitors, and performers trying to pass the time of day with theatrical *panache*—the New York facilities seem well ordered and almost genteel. It is here that most of the major characters for the show were developed.

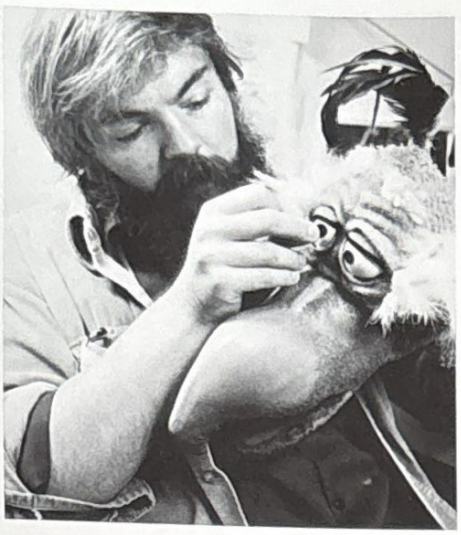
Often new characters still begin with a scribbled sketch, but most of the Muppets who made their debut on *The Muppet Show* are somewhat different from those created by Jim Henson and Don Sahlin for *Sesame Street*. Caroly Wilcox explains that she tried to ensure that *Sesame Street* characters, even the recent additions to the cast, remain simple and "cartoon-like." The majority of puppets built for *The Muppet Show* are relatively complex and anthropomorphic. Establishing this contrast has been a clearly defined artistic policy.

Where these more anthropomorphic puppets are concerned, art director Michael Frith will generally provide drawings that are far more detailed than anything that was commonly seen around the Muppet shop in the old days. He will then work closely with Henson, Caroly Wilcox and the designers and builders to ensure that the concept is carried through to a conclusion that is consistent with the original idea. Frequent trips and telephone calls to London enable Frith (who is also the man largely responsible for the Miss Piggy calendars and the design of many Muppet products) to act as a liaison between the staff in the New York shop and the *Muppet Show* company in England.

The more anthropomorphic kind of puppet used on *The Muppet Show* has also placed a greater emphasis on costuming than has been the case in most earlier Muppet ventures. It is Henson's policy that costumes should not be overwhelming, but—given a character like Miss Piggy—Calista Hendrickson, the chief costume designer for *The Muppet Show*, has not felt herself to be under any serious constraint. Nothing is likely to overwhelm Miss Piggy. The challenge is to match her own soaring imagination.

Also working out of the New York shop is "Faz" Fazakas, a former puppeteer himself and the Muppets' resident mechanical genius. It is Fazakas' job and

Above: A rod puppet manipulated by unseen puppeteers, who are dressed entirely in black to blend with the background.
Opposite: Jim Henson and members of the cast.
Below: Guest star Cloris Leachman gives scale to Doglion Beast and Sweetums, two huge "full costume" Muppets, who are over six feet tall and weigh forty pounds.



Above: Left to right, Lyle Conway, Marianne Harms, Ed Christie and Nomi Fredrick work on Muppet characters in the New York shop. The shoes shown here are typical of the items that must be specially built to scale. At right is one of Michael Frith's sketches for Lips the trumpeter.
Opposite: Art director Michael Frith checks a nearly completed puppet against his original drawing.

Most regular characters on The Muppet Show take shape in the New York workshop, where plastic eyes and urethane foam, along with other exotic and familiar materials, are turned into the puppets that will become familiar to television viewers around the world. Special attention is paid to such details as costume and miniature footwear, which are custom made. Some creations are fitted with cunning mechanisms that control movement of the eyes or ears.

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vocation to explore the frontiers of puppet engineering. It is he who has devised delicate mechanisms to give Muppet figures more and more life-like movements. It is he who has developed remote-controlled eyes and entire remote-controlled puppets. Such experiments have had relatively little impact on *The Muppet Show* itself, however. Their future applications are likely to be in the area of the Muppet film projects, where a whole different set of illusions is required.

Movies provide the Muppet builders with the luxury of time; they know well in advance exactly what characters will be needed. *The Muppet Show* is created in a very different atmosphere, in which new characters must be devised every week in accordance with the demands of the script, a script which may undergo radical changes at the last minute. Because of this, the London workshop is a far from tranquil place.

Often the regular players need repair—as when Fozzie, a trick cigar having exploded in his face, is brought off the set with his fur in flames—but more often the London shop people are improvising new characters, usually at very short notice. Over the years, staff has been added and the inventory of secondary characters has been built up to include many that are re-usable, but in the early days the mood there was nothing less than frenetic.

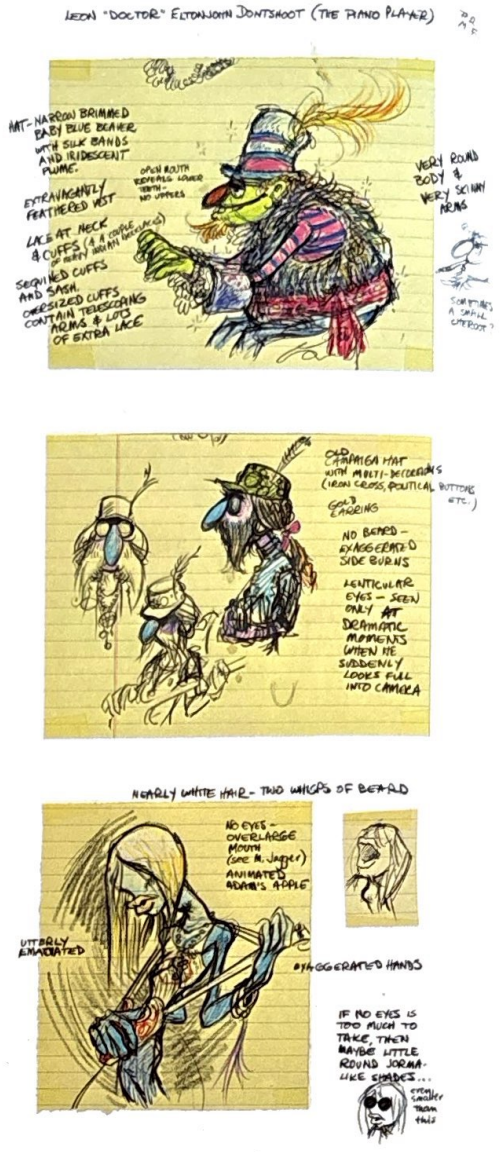
"When I first got to Elstree," says Amy Van Gilder, who for four seasons was in charge of the London workshop, "there were just four of us and we were working till one in the morning every day. We were using a lot of live animals on the show at that time, and they always seemed to find their way into the shop, so you'd come in in the morning, after not much sleep, and be confronted with a piglet running around the floor, or a huge frog blinking at you from a workbench—that could be disconcerting—and there was always something to be built in a hurry.

"Once we had to build a life-size moose in one day. That was fairly typical. I remember we made a grasshopper for one show—it was two or three inches tall and rigged to finger rings—and I brought it to the set when they were ready to begin shooting the scene. Jim said, 'That's just great. I need another one exactly like it, but driving a car, in fifteen minutes.' I loved those situations. The instant problem-solving and the need to work spontaneously was the joy of the whole thing.

"Usually we had about three days to build something. The script might call for dancing cucumbers or singing corn-on-the-cob, or it might be something more enigmatic. One week we were asked to make a Chill—the sort that runs up and down your spine—and then there was a character called the Germ who Sherry Arnott constructed from Cellophane and coat hangers. Those assignments were fun. I remember that Rollie Krewson built a ventriloquist's dummy called Chuckie which had to be put together as if Fozzie had built it.

"The philosophy in the early days was that we shouldn't ship tons of stuff over from New York, so we *had* to improvise. We had only half a dozen 'whatnots' in the shop, so often we'd have to completely rebuild and re-costume them between one production number and the next. We used whatever was available. When Gonzo was the Iron Knight, we made his armor from bathmats and things you can find in hardware stores. When Kermit needed a white waistcoat for his evening dress suit, I went into the bathroom and took down one of those roller towels, then cut the waistcoat from that. It looked fine.

"There were always rigging situations to deal with too. We had to rig puppets to drink, to swim, to wrestle, to row, to drive cars, to shoot arrows. We had to rig rats to hang from floating balloons. We had to rig Kermit and Piggy so they could be


LEON "DOCTOR" ELTONJOHN JONTSHOOT (THE PIANO PLAYER)
HAT- NARROW BRIMMED BABY BLUE BEAVER WITH SILK BANDS AND IRIDESCENT PLUME.
EXTRAVAGANTLY FEATHERED VEST
LACE AT NECK & CUFFS (4 A YARD OF HEAVY IRISH LINEN)
SEQUINED CUFFS AND SASH. OVERSIZED CUFFS CONTAIN TELESCOPING ARMS & LOTS OF EXTRA LACE
OPEN MOUTH REVEALS LOWER TEETH - NO UPPERS
VERY ROUND & VERY SCRAWNY ARMS
SOMETIMES A SMALL UMBRELLA
OLD CHAPAREGA HAT WITH MULTI-DECORATIONS (MEDAL CLOSP, POLITICAL BUTTONS ETC.)
GOLD EARRING
NO BEARD - EXAGGERATED SIDE BURNS
LENTICULAR EYES - SEEN ONLY AT DRAMATIC MOMENTS WHEN HE SUDDENLY LOOKS FULL INTO CAMERA
NEARLY WHITE HAIR - TWO WISPS OF BEARD
NO EYES - OVERLARGE MOUTH (SEE M. Jagger) ANIMATED ADAM'S APPLE
UTTERLY EMACIATED
EXAGGERATED HANDS
IF NO EYES IS TOO MUCH TO TAKE, THEN MAYBE LITTLE ROUND JORMA-LIKE SHADES...
STOLEN SHAMELESSLY FROM THIS

Michael Frith's sketches for Dr. Teeth, Floyd Pepper and a pre-Janice character show members of the Electric Mayhem at an early stage of their evolution.

Above: A general view of the New York workshop.
Left: Stages in the creation of Pops, The Muppet Show's stage doorman. In the New York shop, Michael Frith's drawings are used as a guide while the puppet is fashioned from polyurethane foam and a variety of other materials. Later, in London, costume designer Calista Hendrickson prepares Pops for his appearance on the show, where he will be on the capable hands of Jerry Nelson.

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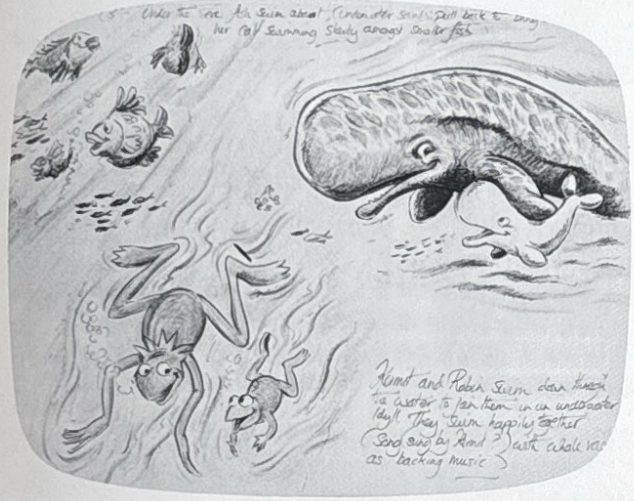
Above: Franz "Faz" Fazakas is the Muppets' resident technical wizard. A former puppeteer himself, he now devises such things as the sophisticated servomechanisms for electronically remote-controlled puppets that contribute much to the magic of the Muppets.
Left: Muppet builder Leslee Asch works on one of Sweetum's feet.

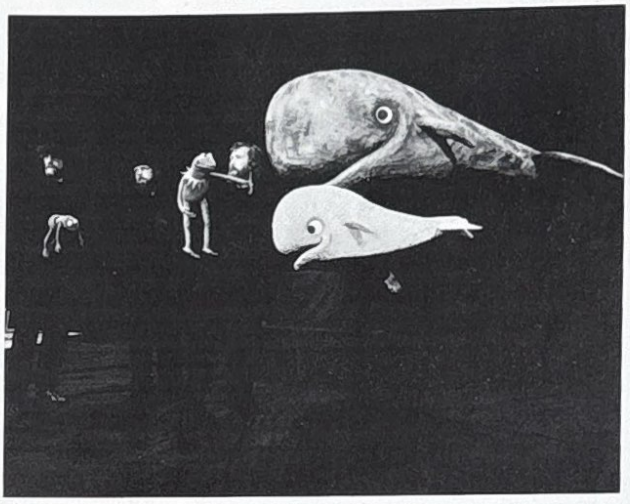
catapulted into Statler and Waldorf's box. Once we had to rig a whole mob of Japanese pole-vaulters so they could actually pole-vault.

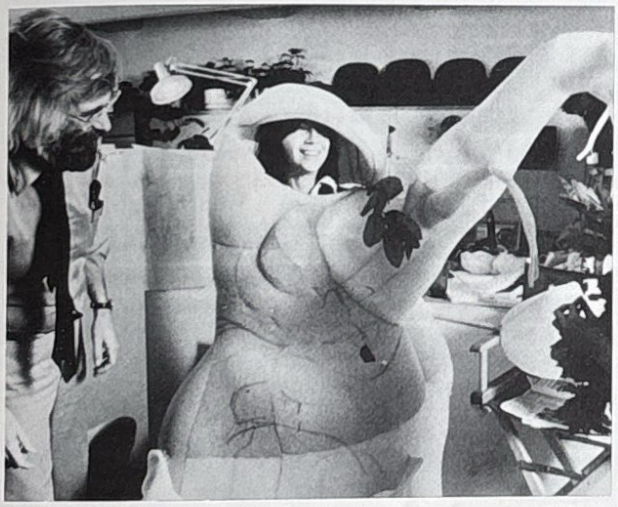
"Costuming was fun. I think Miss Piggy as a mermaid was one of our best efforts. I also liked the cancan-dancer rats and the costumes for the motorcycle-gang pigs. For me, though, the most enjoyable thing was taking a 'whatnot' and turning it into a cowboy or an Arab or whatever the script called for. I always liked the ones that were built in one day."

The fact that so many Muppets are built in a day, and used only once before being transmuted into yet other new characters, which will in turn undergo some curious sea change, has been crucial to the success of *The Muppet Show.* There have been other puppet stars on television—Kukla and Ollie, for example—to compare with Kermit, Piggy and Gonzo, but no other puppet show has ever provided its stars with such a context, has surrounded them with such a seething tide of vitality. The Muppet builders have made possible a world in which anything—from Mexican lobsters to penguins in sunglasses—is likely to invade the screen. The Muppet universe, it seems, is infinitely protean.

Opposite:
Top left: Amy Van Gilder at work in the London shop.
Top right: The Great Gonzo in armor from the local hardware store.
Center left: A panel from John Stevenson's storyboard for a production number with a "save the whales" theme.
Center right: Preparing to commit the whales to tape in Studio D.
Lower left: While Michael Frith watches, Leslee Asch tries the partly finished trunk of an animated tree for size.
Lower right: On set, the tree prepares to threaten Miss Piggy with herbaceous mayhem.


Under the sea Kermit and Clementine sing "Just back to sing her part" Swimming Steady Anyway Shake fish
Kermit and Robin swim down there to listen to fan them in an underwater idyll They swim happily together Song sung by Kermit with whale vox as backing music





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5. Jim Henson

Jim Henson's office at ATV studios is large, and contains a desk big enough to satisfy any latter-day Hollywood mogul, but its ambiance is unaffected and casual. On the walls are informal montages of unframed photographs. There are photos of Henson posing with various guest stars—Rudolf Nureyev, Gilda Radner—but mostly the display is made up of guests interacting with Muppets: George Burns with Kermit, Danny Kaye with Miss Piggy, Lynn Redgrave with Gonzo, Elton John with the Electric Mayhem, Edgar Bergen and Charlie McCarthy with Fozzie Bear and a whole gang of regulars. Alongside these large black-and-white photographs are smaller color stills from *The Muppet Movie* and newspaper cartoons relating to the Muppets. (At a union meeting British utility workers vote unanimously in favor of a motion which says that there should be no blackouts during *The Muppet Show.*)

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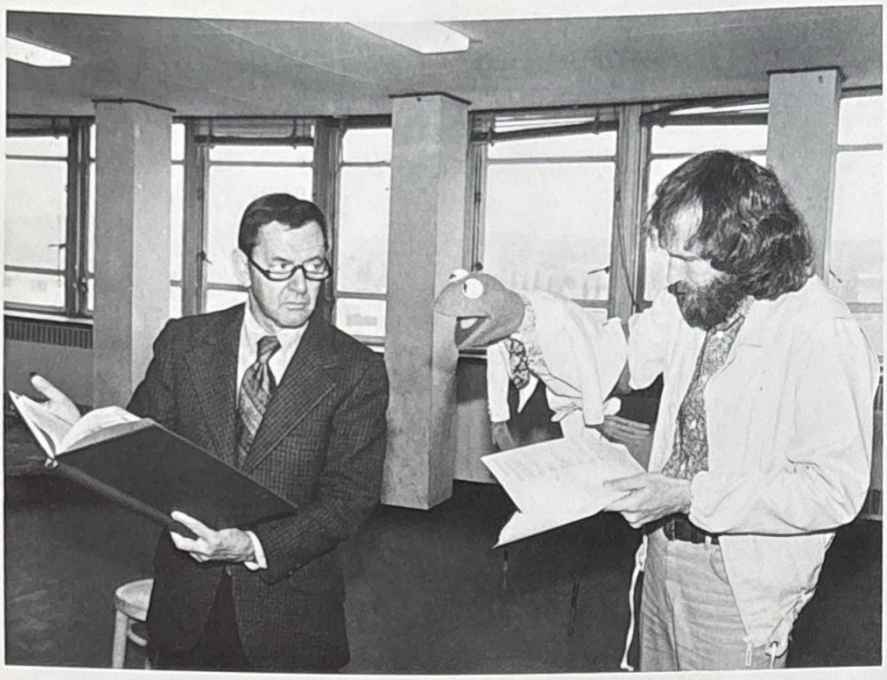

Above left: In Rehearsal Room 7/8, Jim Henson and Kermit work on a routine with guest Tony Randall.
Above: Dr. Teeth of the Electric Mayhem, one of Jim Henson's regular characters.
Below: Jim Henson and the Swedish Chef.

One wall is lined with shelves on which are stored videotapes of past shows along with record albums, a record player and a tape deck. Here too is a small refrigerator stocked with soft drinks, beer and cider. Unrefrigerated bottles of soda water and cider are stored in crates beneath windows that overlook the modest rooftops of the commuter belt. Nearby are two television sets, one hooked up to a videotape recorder, the other to the Studio D control booth so that it monitors whatever is happening in front of the cameras down on the floor. On top of this set is a Golden Rose of Montreaux award—Europe's equivalent of the Emmy—and flanking it are two players' masks which were awarded to the Muppets by the British Academy of Film and Television Arts.

On either side of the desk—which is littered, but not cluttered, with memos, books, video cassettes, sheet music—are three telephones and a swivel chair. Elsewhere there are comfortable chairs of chrome tubing and black leather, along with a matching sofa and various pieces that seem to have wandered in from another office entirely. On a ledge in one corner stands an Artoo-Detoo cookie jar and hanging from a hook nearby is a Pierrot marionette, a gift from Raquel Welch.

This is Jim Henson's office, but you will not often find him in it. The Muppet empire is not run from a desk. This does not mean that the office remains empty, however, since it is used by just about everybody else. During the course of a couple of hours you are apt to encounter there any number of people: Jerry Juhl making amendations to a freshly typed script; an Italian interviewer watching tapes; Dave Goelz, during a break, fetching himself a tonic water from the refrigerator; Jerry Nelson reading the latest batch of fan mail; Ray Charles and Derek Scott discussing a musical number for next week's show; a production secretary checking the monitor to see what is happening on the studio floor, trying to gauge whether or not this is a good moment to head down there to bring some pressing matter to Henson's attention.

Jim Henson is not an easy man to keep up with. A typical Henson week, during

Above: On-camera, Kermit and George Burns discuss the show-business life.
Left: Off-camera, Jim Henson and executive producer David Lazer confer on real-life business.

production of *The Muppet Show,* begins early on Sunday morning when he arrives at the studio to work with the director and editor in the videotape-editing room. At 10:05 he stops by his office to glance at a pile of memos and to look over some revisions of the current script. At a little after 10:20 he heads up to Rehearsal Room 7/8 to greet this week's guest star before they and the Muppet staff read through the script for the first time. After a short break, which Henson spends chatting with the guest, everyone returns to begin rehearsing musical numbers for the week's show. This continues till around 1:00, when a lunch break is called. Henson pays another visit, brief this time, to the editing room, then heads for the studio canteen, where the regular Sunday writers' meeting is already in process. After spending a little over an hour discussing next week's script, and ideas for another show that is still more than two months off, he returns to the rehearsal room, where he and the other performers work till 3:45 on the songs for the current show. At 4:00 he has another meeting, this one in his office and connected not with *The Muppet Show* but with an upcoming movie project. A little after 6:00 Henson leaves the studio at the end of what is the lightest workday he will have this week.

On Monday he is at the studio before 9:00 for a meeting with the show's scenic designers. At four minutes before 10:00 he makes his way to the band stage to work with the guest star and oversee the pre-recording of instrumental tracks for this week's show. He is there for a little over three hours, then heads for the canteen to meet with Jerry Juhl. Normally no lunch meeting is scheduled on Monday, but something always seems to come up. This week last-minute changes have to be made to three scenes and so an impromptu script conference is necessary. At 2:30 Henson returns to the band stage to pre-record voice tracks with the other Muppet performers. This occupies him till a little after 5:00, when he pays a brief visit to his office, then makes his way to the editing room for the sound dub of the show that has been edited over the weekend. This is a lengthy process and Henson does not head for home until well after 11:00.

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On Tuesday at 9:30 Henson is out on the floor of Studio D, looking over the set for the first sequence to be taped, the show's major production number with the guest star. He spends some time in the workshop, chatting and joking with Muppet designers and puppeteers, then he and the other performers head back to the floor to begin rehearsing for the cameras. Except for a seventy-five-minute lunch break, which he will spend at a production meeting in Rehearsal Room 7/8, Henson will be engaged for the whole day, till 7:30, working on the studio floor with occasional visits to the workshop. The shop interludes are hardly periods of respite, however, since they become the occasion for signing papers, making phone calls, checking on the progress of characters being built for the next show, and a dozen other activities besides.

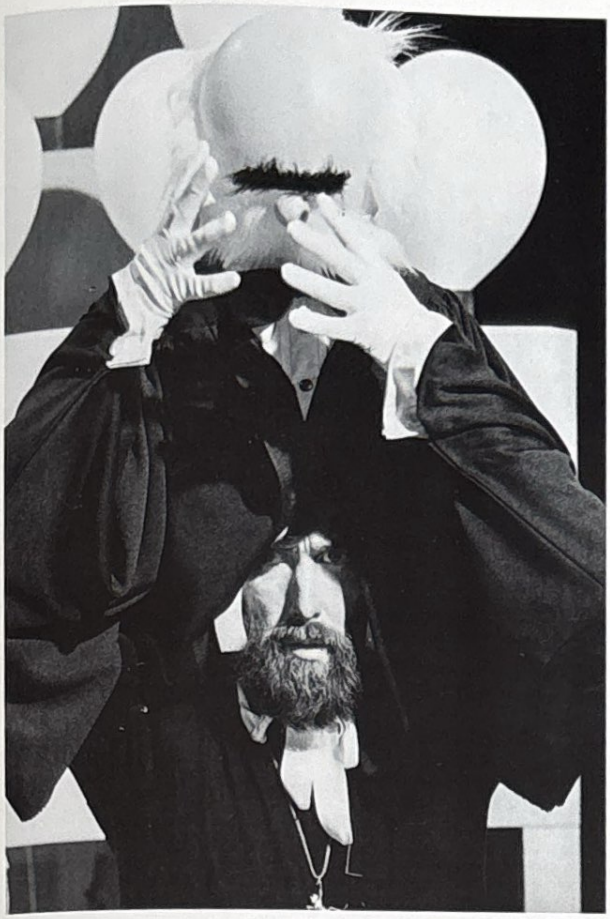
Wednesday is very much a repeat of Tuesday, except that the lunch break means a music meeting rather than a production meeting. All scenes with the guest star, this week, are finished by mid-afternoon, but taping continues till 7:30. Afterward Henson spends an hour in his office, making phone calls to New York and California, then leaves the studio for Hampstead, where in another workshop across the street from his London home he has a meeting with Muppet builders who are experimenting with new techniques of molding plastics.

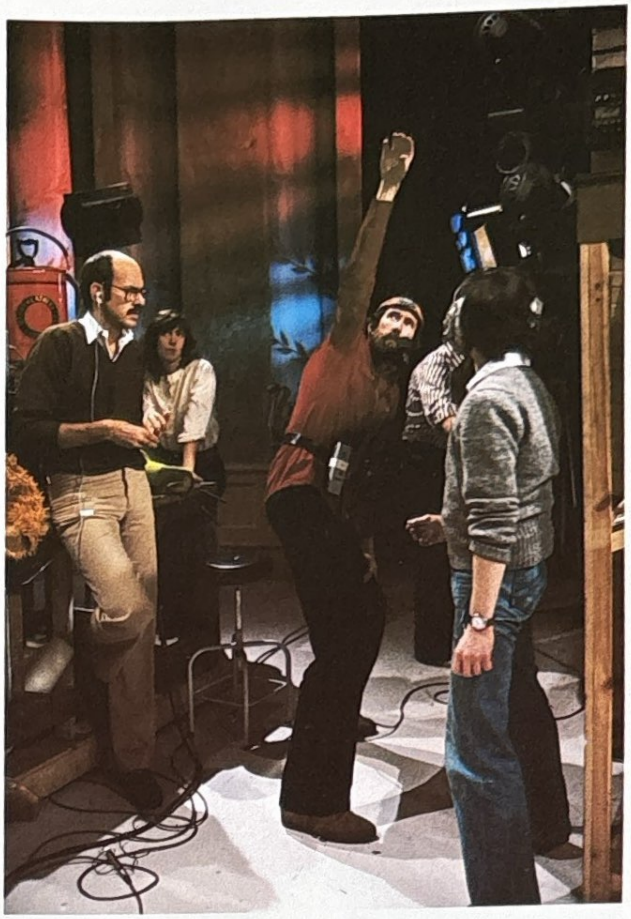
Thursday is another taping day. Today's lunch is a writers' meeting at an Italian restaurant near the studio. Usually this is the final tape day, but this week, as happens from time to time, there are scenes from previous shows to be made up, so a fourth day of taping has been scheduled.

Friday follows the same general pattern as other tape days. At lunch Henson and Frank Oz give an interview to a French journalist. *The Muppet Movie* is about to open in France, and as soon as taping is over for the day, Henson and Oz, accompanied by Kermit and Miss Piggy and a skeleton crew from the shop, are rushed to Heathrow Airport, where they board a plane for Orly, arriving in Paris in time for a late supper. On Saturday Henson and Oz spend the day in a French television studio, taping a spot that will be used to promote the movie. That evening they fly back to London. On Sunday morning Jim Henson is back at ATV Studios before ten o'clock.

In considering this schedule, of course, one must remember that Henson is carrying out many different jobs at the same time. On the studio floor, for example, he is not only performing several of the show's key characters (and various bit players) but also—in consultation with Frank Oz and the director (either Peter Harris or Philip Casson)—staging every scene. As a member of the writing staff, he is concerned not only with the current script but also with those for half a dozen upcoming shows. Given the nature of *The Muppet Show*, he must be in constant communication with his musical staff, and as the show's producer, Henson must approve set designs, stay abreast of what is happening in the shop, participate in all aspects of post-production and generally keep an eye on every technical and creative facet of the show. Aside from these responsibilities, of course, Henson is also the executive head of a sizable corporation with multiple interests. On any given day, therefore, he may have to make decisions about movies, licensing arrangements, expanding office or storage facilities, or any of the hundreds of unexpected things that crop up in the day-to-day operation of any business.

The entertainment industry is full of ambitious men, and hence of workaholics. Henson is something of an enigma in that—while clearly he is very ambitious and he follows a work schedule that would daunt most men—he displays none of the obvious side effects or neurotic symptoms that one might expect to find in such a person. He





Above left: Jim Henson peers from beneath a Muppet costume. Above: Frank Oz watches while Henson blocks out a scene, his bare hand standing in for the puppet that will appear on camera.
Left: Henson and Kermit joke with Jean Stapleton.

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Kathy Mullen, Dave Goelz, Jim Henson and Frank Oz are intent on the monitor as a scene from the French Revolution unfolds . . . to the tune of "Stayin' Alive."

seems to be calm and relaxed at all times, taking things in his stride. There is nothing hurried about his manner. He smiles easily, always has time for a joke or a pleasantry. Born in Mississippi, he has something of the Old South about him, an ingrained courtliness allied to a refusal to let his style be altered by outside pressures. Nothing seems to upset him, even though some aspect of production is always threatening to get out of hand. Whatever the problem, Henson seems to dismiss it with a joke or a shrug, followed by an assurance that things will work out just fine.

"Jim runs a very tight ship," says Jerry Juhl, "but he does it with such charm and discretion that he never seems to rub anyone the wrong way." Longtime associates say they have never seen Jim Henson lose his temper, yet Henson himself speaks of moments when he has been exasperated. Returning from taping a guest spot on another show, he describes his anger at the director, who apparently felt he knew more about staging puppet performances than Henson. "Doing guest spots can be very difficult," he concludes, and it may be that this remark gives us a clue to what lies behind his normal, even demeanor.

Henson has created a world in which friction is confined to what happens on screen.

He has surrounded himself with people whose talents mesh with his, people who are devoted to the Muppets and who understand them. This is not to say that he has surrounded himself with "yes men." Most of his closest associates have strong opinions of their own and express them freely. Henson is a good listener and if someone has an idea that is better than his own, he accepts it without hesitation. It is because of this that the others listen to him and accept direction without feeling resentment.

The Muppets themselves are a volatile crowd. Kermit can lose his temper, Piggy can explode, Sam the Eagle can become rigid with exasperation and Animal is constantly on the verge of going berserk. A lot of frustration can be channeled into these characters (and no doubt the viewer enjoys seeing his own frustrations acted out on screen). The Henson organization is, then, a company with a built-in outlet for frustration, and this must be an important reason for the habitual lack of back-biting and acrimony around the studio.

"The difference between Kermit and Jim," says Jerry Juhl, "is that Kermit lives in the best of all possible worlds, a fantasy world in which everything can be resolved at the end of thirty minutes. Jim has to deal with reality." Clearly this is true, yet Jim Henson has evolved for himself a world that, while it is in touch with reality, also has an interface with Kermit's plane of existence. Surrounded by his hand-picked team, Henson can in fact assume—so long as the public continues to love the Muppets—that everything will work out in the end.

Jim Henson has been fortunate in that, while success came to him early, his career has built gradually over a quarter of a century, and always within his own terms (though here he must be given full credit for not letting go of his own vision). He has not had to deal with the phenomenon of overnight celebrity. Also it may well have been a blessing that *The Muppet Show* was not picked up by one of the major American networks. Had he found himself working in Hollywood and answerable to network executives, the pressures might well have made it impossible for him to sustain the atmosphere that now exists in the Muppet world. Lord Grade's hands-off policy has been vital to the success of the enterprise. It seems probable too that the physical fact of the show's being produced in England has had the beneficial effect of drawing the members of the Henson company closer together.

Puppetry, as practiced by this company, is an extremely complex business, yet Henson has a way of making even this look easy. Partly this is a matter of experience, but chiefly it is a matter of style, a reflection of Henson's psychological makeup. Frank Oz is as experienced as Henson, and is probably the most gifted puppeteer of his generation, yet his style is the opposite of effortless. Oz seems to shake a performance out of himself and his characters, like a dog worrying a bone. Henson's approach has more in common with a dog wagging its tail. One tends to overplay, the other to underplay.

Both do what they do superlatively well and the chemistry between them is extraordinary. They are one of the great teams of the entertainment world, deserving of being mentioned in the same breath as Laurel and Hardy, or Rogers and Astaire. There is a wonderful grace to what they do, and to watch them playing off one another on the studio floor is an unforgettable experience.

One senses that as a puppeteer, Henson is generally working—however effectively—well within his abilities, as opposed to Oz, who is always testing the limits of expressiveness for a given puppet in a given situation. As a puppeteer, Oz is peerless. Where Henson excels is as a manipulator of the medium. "Jim synthesizes,"

Season

Steve Martin

Elton John

Madeline Kahn

Nancy Walker

Rudolf Nureyev

Lou Rawls

Teresa Brewer

Bernadette Peters

John Cleese

George Burns

Cloris Leachman

Rich Little

II

Bob Hope

Judy Collins

Zero Mostel

Julie Andrews

Peter Sellers

Petula Clark

Dom De Luise

Edgar Bergen

Jaye P. Morgan

Cleo Laine

Milton Berle

Don Knotts

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Above: On a jungle set, Jim Henson prepares guest Dyan Cannon for an invasion of penguins.
Left: At a Royal Command Performance, Lord Grade presents Dave Goelz, Richard Hunt, Jerry Nelson, Frank Oz and Jim Henson to Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth.

Jim (Dr. Bob) Henson, veteran nurse Loretta Swit and Richard Hunt (nurse Janice) watch the playback of a segment of "Veterinarian's Hospital."

says Oz. "He pulls together different technological elements in such a way as to achieve an artistic end. Also his concentration is amazing. He absorbs everything and can recall anything when he needs it."

Through his acquired knowledge of camera angles, lenses and special effects, and through the use of imaginative editing and ingeniously designed sets, Henson has evolved a system that permits his puppet characters to move in "cinematic space" almost as freely as human performers (and to interact convincingly with human performers). As a writer and puppeteer, Henson has contributed more than anyone else to the way the Muppets "act" and "think." He has, quite simply, brought an ancient art form into the twentieth century and set the standards by which anyone working with puppets on television will have to be judged.

The extent to which *The Muppet Show* is dependent upon Jim Henson can be illustrated by a story that Jerry Juhl tells:

"I remember an occasion when Jim had an appointment with Lord Grade and left the studio early and unexpectedly. It was a tape day and there were a couple of hours of studio time left, so we just went ahead as usual. The next set-up to be shot was a wrestling match, and on paper it looked like a pretty straightforward scene. After about twenty minutes I received a call to come down to the floor. Frank was there with Philip Casson and they said, 'Do you have any idea how Jim planned to stage this?' I looked at the script, and I looked at the set, and all I could do was shake my head. We puzzled over it for a bit longer, then decided that, rather than waste studio time, we'd forget about this scene and pick up some scenes from another show.

"This show happened to be the one in which Kermit has to leave the Muppet Theater because he's ill and Fozzie takes over the show. Of course, he can't handle it and messes everything up. Anyway, there was Frank with Fozzie up, and everything was going wrong. Suddenly, between takes, Frank looked at me and we both burst out laughing. We were living our own script!"

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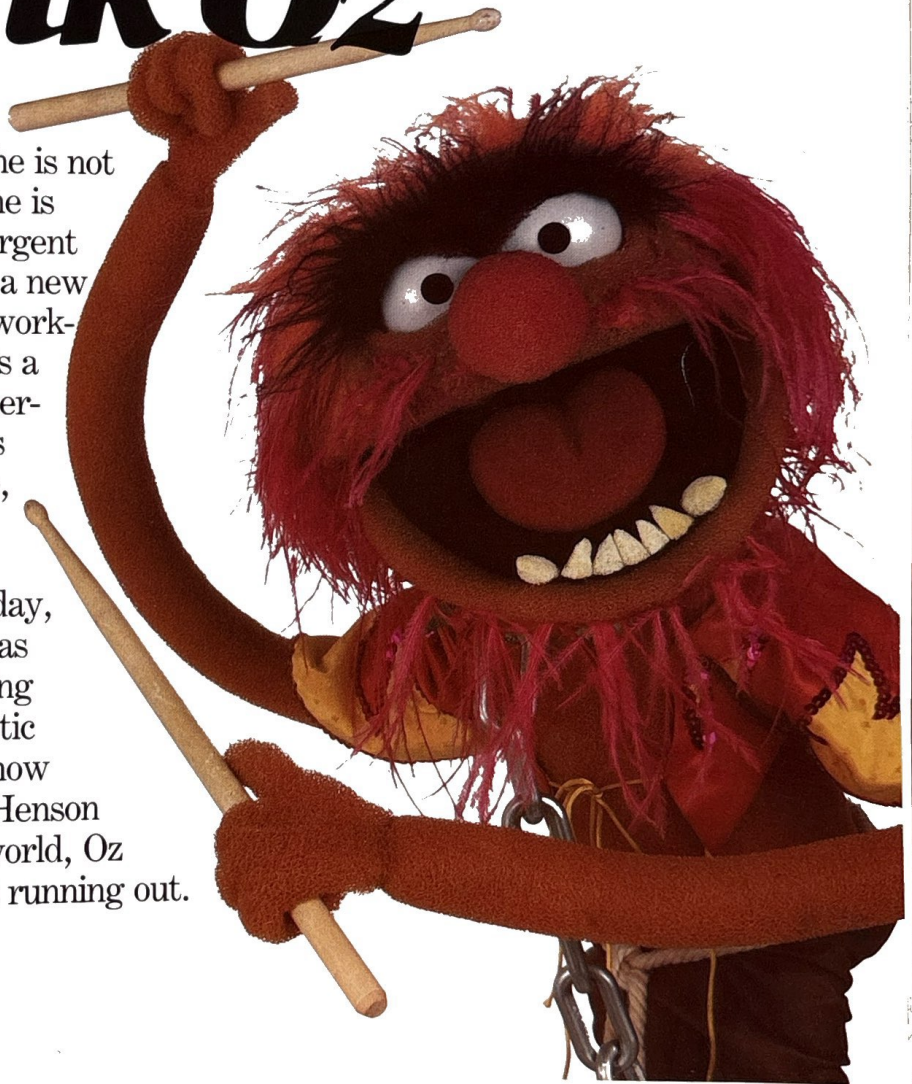
6. Frank Oz

Frank Oz gives the impression of never achieving a state of rest. If he is not working on the floor of Studio D, he is rushing to catch a plane, making urgent phone calls or experimenting with a new puppet in a corner of the Muppet workshop. As with Jim Henson, lunch is a euphemism for a meeting or an interview with a journalist. If he settles on a sofa in the performers' lounge, it is not to relax but, rather, to work out the intricacies of his schedule for the remainder of the day, or to worry over the dialogue he has been given to deliver in an upcoming scene. His schedule is no more hectic than Henson's, it's true, but somehow Frank Oz is always in a hurry. If Henson seems to have all the time in the world, Oz appears to believe that time is fast running out.



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At the age of thirty six, Frank Oz is well on his way to becoming the most widely known and respected performer in the entire history of puppetry. As well as being the voice and animating force of Miss Piggy, Fozzie Bear, Animal and Sam the Eagle for *The Muppet Show,* he performs Bert, Grover and Cookie Monster on *Sesame Street,* he was the Mighty Favog for *Saturday Night Live* and brought the Zen-inflected Yoda to life for *The Empire Strikes Back.*

Besides being the star performer for *The Muppet Show,* Oz is also creative consultant and an officer of Henson Associates. With *The Muppet Show* in its fifth season, Henson and Oz have worked together for seventeen years and, as noted, this is evident in the way they play off each other. They have a way of improvising little bits of business, of bending lines and ad-libbing dialogue that brings to a scene far more than exists in the written script. Both are indispensable to the Muppet organization, and this is a responsibility that Oz, for his part, does not wear lightly. In his presence one is constantly aware of an intense level of concentration, of nervous energy waiting to be released.

Henson has said that Oz "is probably the person most responsible for the Muppets being funny." Paradoxically, Oz gives the impression of being by far the most serious of the Muppet performers. He takes nothing for granted, questions everything, seems always ready to throw out a challenge if he feels there is some way in which the show can be improved. At a writers' meeting, for example, his attitude is positively combative. Out of the blue he announces, "I'm not happy with the new cold openings. I don't think they're working. For me they're not working." ("Cold opening" is, quite simply, television jargon for the start of the show. In the case of *The Muppet Show* this is the little scene played out with the guest star before the titles.) The mood of the meeting has been very relaxed to this point, but Oz's challenge puts everyone on their mettle. There is still a good deal of laughter and byplay—these are comedy writers, after all—but Jerry Juhl and the other members of the writing staff begin to defend the new concept for the cold opening. (It hinges on a recently introduced character, Pops the stage doorman.) Henson is in sympathy with the majority view, which maintains that the openings are working, but Oz persists. "I'm sorry. For me they're *not* working," he repeats. "Not the way the old ones did." After a few moments' reflection he makes a concession. "Last week's opening did work, but it was the only one that had any real punch." A discussion ensues. What made that particular opening better than the others?

"Perhaps it's not the concept that's at fault," Henson suggests. "I think that one was just tighter."

"Maybe," says Oz. Eventually everyone agrees that the cold opening could be sharper and Oz, satisfied, moves on to a new point. "I'm not happy with the monologue at the end of next week's show. For me it doesn't work."

As temperamental opposites, Henson and Oz complement each other in many different ways. On the studio floor Henson directs by suggestion and query: "Perhaps we need a laugh here? Maybe if Jerry pauses for a beat before he has Strangepork turn to look at Piggy." Oz, on the other hand, is characteristically direct and succinct: "This isn't playing right because the joke isn't funny." Above all, he is critical of his own work, looking always for perfection, a perfection which—because of the nature of the medium, with the possibility of repeated takes—is almost attainable. Given the standards he sets himself, that tantalizing "almost" must sometimes drive Frank Oz to distraction. At the end of a long day, after a complex scene has required a dozen takes,

Sam the Eagle, a self-appointed guardian of good taste and connoisseur of culture (and one of Frank Oz's regular characters on The Muppet Show) has failed utterly in his every attempt to bring either to the show.

Above: Jim Henson and Frank Oz in the London workshop with Kermit, Miss Piggy and other members of the cast.
Right: On the backstage set, Oz readies Fozzie Bear for action.

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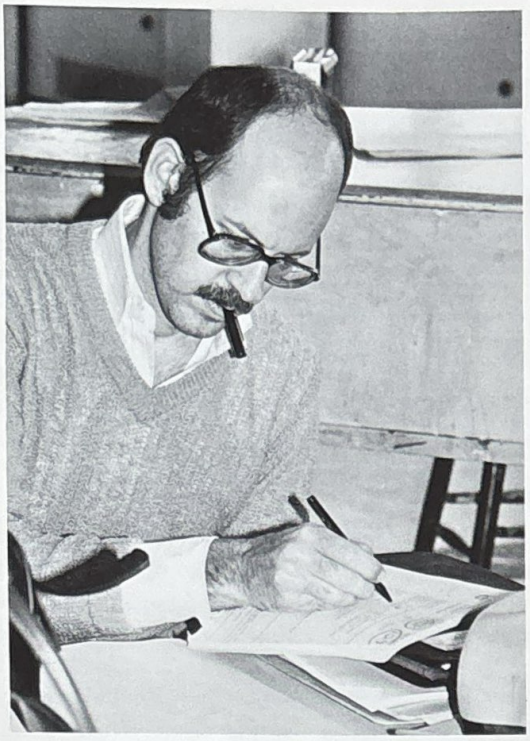

the last of which seems flawless to the untrained eye, Jim Henson—himself obsessed with quality, but necessarily aware of budgets and schedules—turns to Frank Oz and says, "That looked all right to me." Oz studies the floor for a couple of seconds before acquiescing. "I guess so," he says. "Let's move on." But one senses that part of him would like to try the scene just one more time.

Frank Oz's humor is a sudden release of energy, a surge of comic inventiveness that is in direct proportion to his habitual seriousness. It comes bursting out almost despite him, as if a psychological dam has crumbled. Given his sometimes prickly temperament, he is capable of generating tense situations, but then the humor breaks through and clears the air of acrimony. (As with any authentic comedian, it is not so much what he says as the way he says it.) His comedy has vitality because to him it is a necessity; it is crucial to the way he deals with the world. Without it, one senses, his ingrained seriousness might become unbearable. This vitality is infectious. Oz is one of the keys to the Muppets being funny because he has the ability to trigger the other performers. Time and again he provokes responses which add to the comedy of the scene being played.

Frank Oz was born in Hereford, England, in 1944. His father, who is Dutch, and his mother, who is Flemish, were in the United Kingdom as refugees from the Nazis, and after the war the family lived briefly in Belgium before emigrating to the United States when Oz was five years old. Settled in Oakland, California, Oz learned his basic puppetry skills from his parents, who were accomplished amateurs. By the time he was in his midteens he had become a skilled performer, and it was at this point that Jim Henson first saw him working at a puppeteers' convention in California. Henson was immediately impressed by Oz's ability, but could not hire him right away since Oz was still in high school. Instead he hired Oz's partner, Jerry Juhl. Two years later, in 1963,

Above: Characteristically intense, Frank Oz makes notes on his script and, at right, has Sam the Eagle react to guest star Spike Milligan's appalling display of the colors.
Opposite: Flanked by Jerry Nelson and Steve Whitmire, Frank Oz and Miss Piggy provide some reasonably close harmony for country singer Johnny Cash.
Below: Fozzie, the world's humblest stand-up bear.

Oz joined the Muppets, allowing Juhl to concentrate on writing.

"From the beginning," says Jim Henson, "Frank was a superb manipulator—he could make a puppet do anything—but he was completely unable to do voices. It was years before he would even try. In fact, it reached the point where I despaired of him ever doing voices."

By the time *Sesame Street* came along, however, Oz had overcome this vocal inhibition and was ready to seize the opportunity of creating characters who would implant themselves permanently in the matrix of American popular culture.

When Oz speaks of his art, he is quick to admit that he does not always understand exactly how he achieves the effects that he pulls from his characters. "What we are doing is so complicated that you don't really have time to think about how you are doing it. . . . I don't want to sound pretentious, but there's a kind of Zen thing that happens. First your body understands, and then your mind grasps what you're doing. Sometimes."

Oz emphasizes that he is *not* Bert, he is *not* Cookie Monster, he is *not* Fozzie Bear, he is *not* Miss Piggy, and he speaks with disdain of those movies—like *The Great Gabbo* and *Devil Doll*— in which a ventriloquist becomes possessed by the evil *persona* of his dummy. "That's not the way it happens. If Jim was really Kermit, he couldn't run this organization. Jim and I each have eight or nine characters we can slip in and out of without even thinking. It's like putting on a glove. Aspects of all my characters exist somewhere inside me, but they're still just characters that have been invented by me and the writers, in the same way a novelist invents characters for the story he's telling."

If there is any common denominator to the characters Oz performs, it is that they are all vulnerable. *Sesame Street's* Grover is perhaps the archetypal example of this,

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Above: In a show from the fifth season, guest star Carol Burnett was assigned the unenviable task of performing as Animal's partner in a dance marathon and reacted accordingly.
Left: Fozzie Bear attempts to pick up a few tips from Milton Berle.

but all of Oz's *Muppet Show* characters show the unmistakable symptoms. Sam the Eagle is the victim of his own righteous indignation, Fozzie Bear can do nothing right (and knows it), Animal is vulnerable to the demands of his all too basic appetites, while Miss Piggy is a whole stew of emotions and insecurities which have rendered her sensitive to every imagined slight.

The difficulties that Oz experiences working with Piggy are easy to imagine. Since it is Piggy herself who possessed the drive that brought about her stardom, and it is the audience that has defined the terms of that stardom, Oz must struggle to make her live within those parameters while, at the same time, retaining control of her (if one can in fact remain in control of a character who is—must be—constantly on the verge of losing control). Oz has to believe in her and her stardom so that she can believe in herself, yet he must remain objective, must keep in mind all her flaws and weaknesses so she can remain vulnerable. With her, he is constantly walking a tightrope. The biggest danger, one that would be all too easy to fall into, is the temptation to make Piggy a camp figure. Fortunately, Oz's innate intensity and seriousness tend to counteract this.

Some Muppets are simply caricatures. Others, like Kermit and Gonzo, are psychologically complex—more so than many human stars—and Piggy certainly falls into this category. Watching Oz work with her, this becomes quite apparent. Oz as Piggy never plays a scene quite the same way twice. As rehearsal follows rehearsal and take follows take, Oz builds on the basic material he has been given to work with, creating the illusion that it is Piggy herself who is turning her lines this way and that, trying to get the most out of them. She becomes the conduit through which Oz's latent energy is released.

Of all his *Muppet Show* characters, Fozzie Bear is the one that Frank Oz appears most completely comfortable with. Fozzie may have presented everyone with a problem in the early days, but now that his role is clearly defined his innocent silliness makes him irresistibly endearing. Even Oz must sometimes wonder what is going on in Piggy's head, but with Fozzie there is no such difficulty. Oz seems at his most relaxed when he is working with the bear.

As an expression of untrammeled energy, no *Muppet Show* character quite compares with Animal, who is part carnivorous beast, part physical manifestation of pure libido. Even the way Oz has this uninhibited creature pronounce his own name—"An-i-*mal*," three distinct syllables, the last made to rhyme with "snarl"—is a statement of a kind of primitive life force. Several of Oz's characters are prone to rage, but Animal takes this to extremes. In Oz's hands he is constantly panting, growling, flexing his wiry anatomy, chomping at the bit. His appetites are so close to the surface as to be practically coincidental with it. ("Wo-man! An-i-mal like wo-man!") They define his entire existence.

It is not only with his regular characters that one appreciates Frank Oz's skills, however. He can take a rather goofy-looking horse which is scheduled to be hypnotized during the course of a sketch and bring it startlingly to life. Its jaw sags, its eyes—actually just cartoon ciphers—seem to spin like pinwheels, its nose twitches, its brow appears to furrow, all at the same time. Energy is transformed into a configuration of conflicting reactions—shock, puzzlement, apprehension, acquiescence—which flicker across the horse's features. One realizes that Frank Oz's art is close to the art of the illusionist: the hand is faster than the eye (and the sleight of hand is itself a manifestation of intelligent energy).

An early Jim Henson sketch for Sam the Eagle.

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Herald Tribune

7. Jerry, Richard & Dave

Along with Henson and Oz, three puppeteers—Jerry Nelson, Richard Hunt and Dave Goelz—have been with *The Muppet Show* from the beginning, and they make up the balance of the first-string team of Muppet performers. Each member of this trio operates a number of the show's regular characters, and each brings to the ensemble a special set of talents. With nearly two decades of experience, Jerry Nelson has become an expert puppeteer, but, beyond that, his great contribution to the Muppets is his ability to assume dozens of different personalities simply by virtue of his remarkable vocal talents. (He might be thought of as the Mel Blanc of the puppet world.) Because of this, many of the one-time characters, conceived for a single sketch, are assigned to him; he has the knack of individualizing each one.

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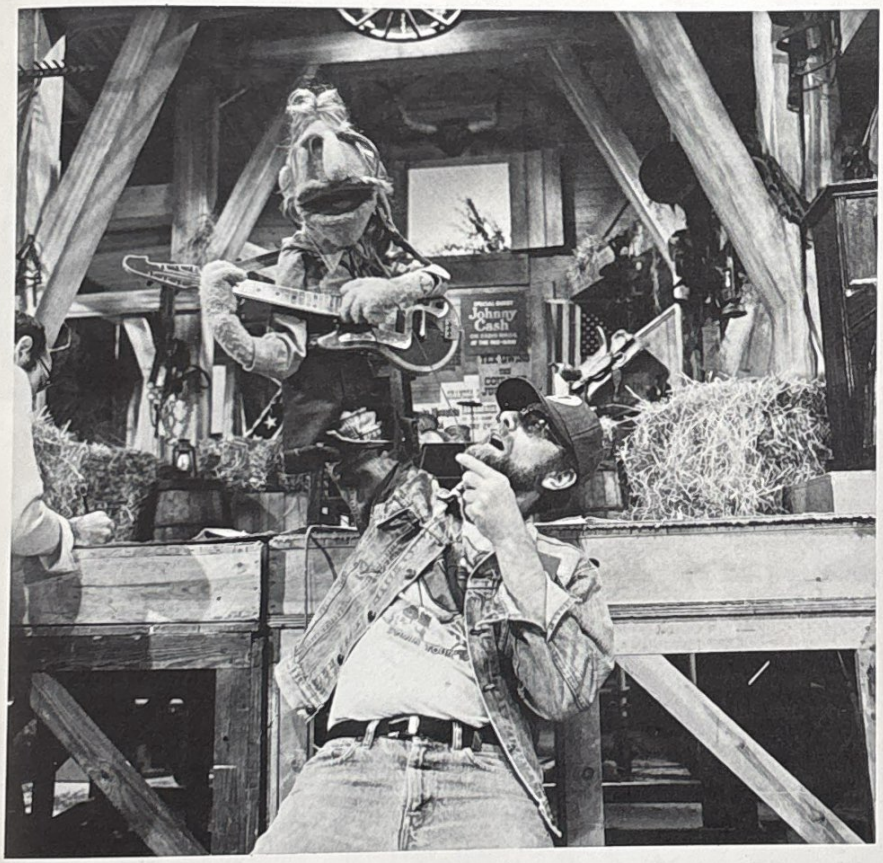
Floyd Pepper accompanies Pearl Bailey in a number in her dressing room.

Also, since he and Richard Hunt are the most accomplished singers among the male performers, many of the musical numbers are built around characters performed by one or both of them.

Born in Oklahoma and raised in Washington, D.C., Jerry Nelson was performing on a local radio station when he was nine years old, and it was from the radio serials and comedy shows of his childhood that he began to acquire his repertoire of voices. (The announcer's voice he uses to introduce "Veterinarian's Hospital" and "Pigs in Space" is straight out of the era of *Lux Radio Theater* and *The Green Hornet.)* After a tour of duty in the army and a brief spell in college, Nelson embarked on a theatrical career, working in stock companies, commercials and movies, but spending much of his time keeping body and soul together by performing a variety of menial tasks. During one lean period he answered an advertisement placed by Bil and Cora Baird, who were looking for people to tour with their puppet theater. Lying about his experience—he had never worked with puppets before—Nelson was hired and learned quickly, remaining with the Bairds when they performed at the New York World's Fair in 1963. Not long after this, he auditioned for the Muppets and was hired as a temporary replacement for Frank Oz, who had been drafted into the service. When Oz returned, Nelson continued to work with the Muppets from time to time until in 1970, with the advent of *Sesame Street,* he became a full-time member of the company. On *Sesame Street* Nelson is The Count, Herry Monster, Biff, Snuffle-Upagus and Sherlock Hemlock; he performed Scred, perhaps the most memorable of the *Saturday Night Live* Muppets; and his regular *Muppet Show* characters include Floyd Pepper, Robin, Lew Zealand, Crazy Harry, Dr. Julius Strangepork and Pops.

There is a lot of Floyd in Jerry Nelson. In fact, if any of the puppeteers can be said to embody the spirit of the Electric Mayhem, it is Nelson. While his relationships with other members of the company are close at a personal level, Nelson clings to an image which makes him appear to be a little bit of an outsider, just as Floyd is a little bit of an outsider at the Muppet Theater. Despite his versatility, Nelson seems to hold on to his own personality more than any of the other principal performers.

Within the context of *The Muppet Show,* Nelson's approach is more objective than that of the other puppeteers, as if he were visiting from a slightly different world. In the context of *Saturday Night Live,* on the other hand, he was capable of stealing the show, and were a series to be built around the Electric Mayhem, Floyd would probably



Left: Jerry Nelson with Diana Ross reviewing a production number on the monitor. Jerry Nelson's regular characters include Sgt. Floyd Pepper, Robin the Frog, Dr. Julius Strangepork and Pops, the stage doorman. His versatility—and especially his musical and vocal talents—have meant that he is called upon to perform many of the more bizarre characters who make one-shot appearances on The Muppet Show.

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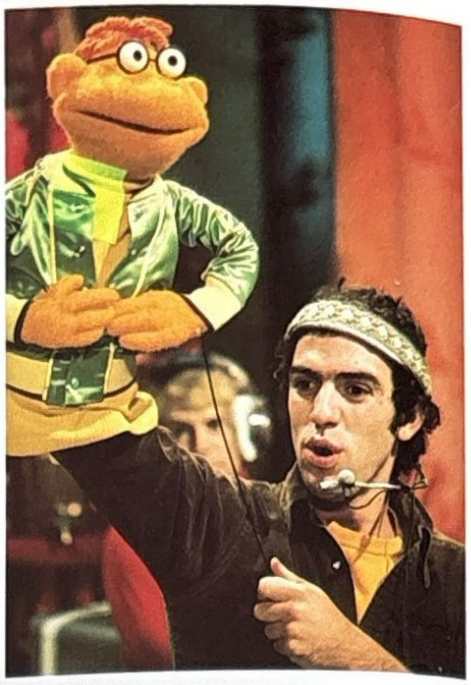

Richard Hunt is another versatile performer whose characters on The Muppet Show include Scooter, Sweetums, Statler, Bobby Benson (leader of the All-Baby Band), Beaker and Janice.

emerge as the central figure. (It seems likely that in his own world Floyd might have the same ability to ward off chaos that Kermit displays in the Muppet Theater.)

Unlike most members of the Muppet troupe, Richard Hunt—who was born and raised in New Jersey—comes from a family of performers. Soon after graduating from high school, he tried out for the Muppets, not because he had any experience as a puppeteer but simply because he was a fan. After taking part in a workshop production, he was invited to help out with various guest appearances and then, in 1972, became a regular member of the company, working first of all on *Sesame Street*, where he performs Don Music, Sully and a menagerie of incidental characters. On *The Muppet Show* Hunt is Scooter, Sweetums, Statler, Bobby Benson, Beaker and Janice among others.

Richard Hunt is often to be discovered reading the *International Herald Tribune:* he reads it in the canteen, on the band stage, in the performers' lounge and on the set. More often, though, he is performing. He seems to get more unadulterated pleasure from performing than anyone else in the organization. When he is not working on camera, he is apt to have Scooter or Beaker or Janice—anyone—on his arm for the purpose of entertaining visitors to the studio. If there are no visitors around, he will attempt to entertain his co-workers. If they are too busy or bored or exhausted to pay attention, he will conduct a conversation with himself (that is to say, with the character he is operating):

"Isn't it *great*, Richard?"

"What's that, Scooter?"

"This week's show, of course! What else? I think it's just wonderful!"

Just then Jerry Juhl walks by. Scooter looks at him, leans toward Richard, masks his mouth with one hand and says in a stage whisper that can be heard all over the studio, "How about the writing talent on this show? Isn't it unbelievable? Without these guys I'd have *nothing* to say!"

If Richard Hunt doesn't have a Muppet handy, he performs anyway, mugging for a still cameraman, demonstrating a Three Stooges routine for the benefit of a crew member, impersonating Nelson Eddy for no particular reason at all. Like Jerry Nelson, he is a versatile on-camera performer, but his importance to the show derives also from his off-camera personality. He makes the crew laugh, jokes with the guest stars, clowns for the shop personnel. He is one of the chief reasons for the loose atmosphere that exists around Studio D despite the pressure and the slow pace that are endemic to television production.

"I spend my days in a junior high school," says Dave Goelz, momentarily exasperated by the chaos around him in the performers' lounge. In fact, one could very easily imagine Dave Goelz teaching math or physics to seventh- and eighth-graders. Bearded and bespectacled, he has a studious, slightly quizzical manner. Raised in Burbank, California—just a few blocks from the Walt Disney Studio—Goelz trained as an industrial designer. He began building his own puppets and, after meeting Jim Henson and Frank Oz, was invited to come to New York to work in the Muppet workshop. Goelz did not feel at home in New York, however, and soon returned to California where he set up his own business, devising puppets for trade shows and industrial exhibitions.

During this first stay with the Muppets, however, Henson, Oz and others had detected something about Goelz—a certain quality of humor that was unforced and original—which convinced them that he had potential as a Muppet performer. In 1974

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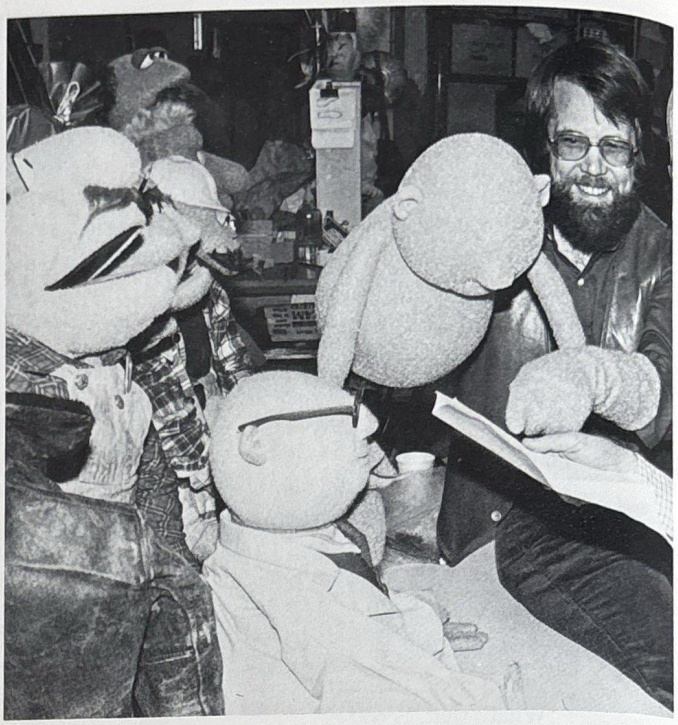


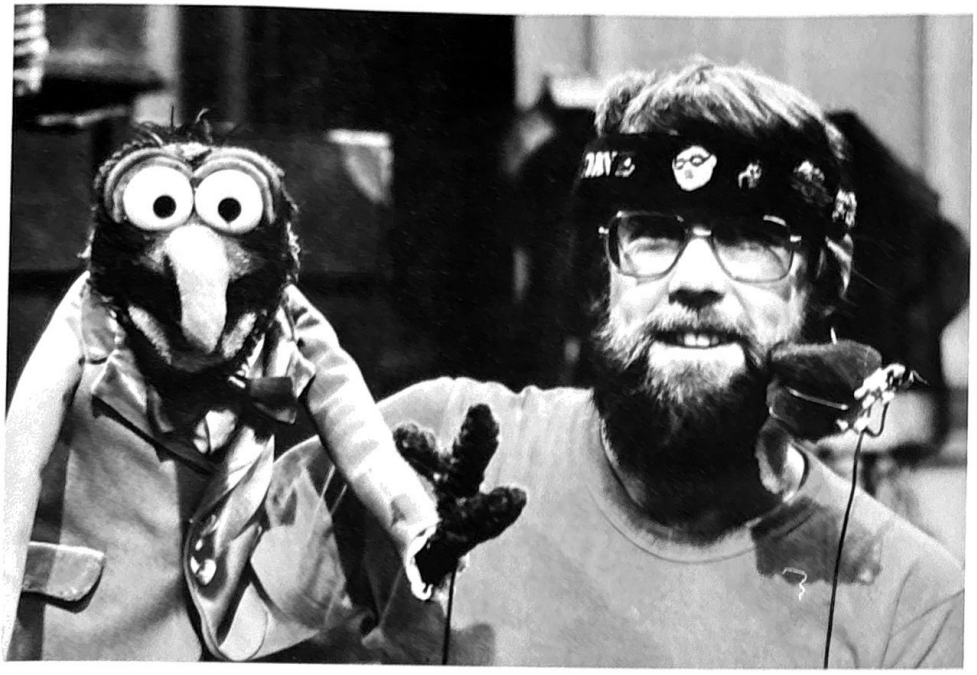
Dave Goelz's regular characters include Dr. Bunsen Honeydew, Zoot, Beauregard and the Great Gonzo but, like all the Muppet performers, he is prepared to take on any assignment—such as the bucktoothed fiddler seen at left.

Henson asked Goelz to return to New York as a puppeteer. Despite some initial lapses of confidence, Goelz found that he was enjoying himself and developing rapidly. By the time *The Muppet Show* began its first season, he was ready to take on several regular characters including Zoot, Bunsen Honeydew, Muppy and, of course, the Great Gonzo.

The newest of the first-string performers, Goelz is able to recall quite vividly the difficulties that he encountered when he began working with the Muppets. "For me," he says, "they fell into three categories—technical, performance and emotional. From a technical viewpoint, working with the Muppets is like learning to play the drums, only much harder. You have to do many things at the same time, and each of them presents a special problem. To give just one example, what you see on the monitor is reversed, so to have your puppet move to the left, you must move him to the right. It takes maybe five years to begin to do everything without thinking about it. In fact, I still find it difficult. As far as performing is concerned, unlike some of the other puppeteers, I had no background. There was some germ there, but I'd never thought seriously about developing it. I took one acting class—literally one two-hour class—but for the most part I had to learn on the job. Music was another problem. In the early days it took me a week to learn a melody, and it still isn't easy. Emotionally I found working with the Muppets a strain at first because I was traveling in pretty heavy company. There's Frank and Jim to start with, but then I found myself on a set with people like Lena Horne and Peter Ustinov. There was a lot of pressure."

Despite the strain of learning his craft in front of the cameras, Dave Goelz has demonstrated that he has an uncanny ability to get inside a character and, while his style of performance is quite different, he is capable of bringing to a role the same intensity of concentration as Frank Oz. This gift is one of those things that are difficult to communicate verbally.

"It's easy for me to do Bunsen," says Goelz, "because I've known dozens of Bunsens.



Actually I don't think he's very funny except as a foil for Beaker, who is one of my favorite characters. Zoot is a big puzzle for me. People write to me and say they know people exactly like Zoot. Well, I'd like to meet one of them, because I've never met anyone like that. I found that when the writers gave Zoot lines to speak, I would always try to give them away to other characters, because I didn't know what to do with him. Maybe that helped to define the character. Perhaps it's best that he's so non-verbal. I do know how to make him play the saxophone and I guess that's what Zoot is all about. Zoot is just a fifty-year-old burnt-out musician. The audience is making the character by filling in the blanks."

His finest creation, it goes without saying, is Gonzo. It seems likely that any of the top Muppet performers could have developed Gonzo into a funny character, but it's doubtful that anyone but Dave Goelz could have made him so complex. Gonzo is to some extent defined by his role in the show, yet he could have been interpreted in several different ways. He could, for example, be made to seem half-witted—that possibility was implicit in the early scripts—but Goelz has a way of avoiding the obvious. His Gonzo displays a certain perverse intelligence. He performs improbable feats that have very painful consequences *not* because he is stupid but because he is prepared to do anything for effect (and perhaps rather enjoys the pain). It may be, as Goelz says, that everything Gonzo does is inappropriate, but that is not because he is short of marbles but rather because his intelligence is focused on other goals.

Dave Goelz gives much of the credit for the development of Gonzo's personality to the show's writers. "The pleasure he takes in pain, for example, comes mostly from them. They saw that it was consistent with his lack of judgment." At the same time, it is no accident that Gonzo, the quirkiest of the Muppets, is performed by Goelz, the puppeteer who came to the show by the most unlikely route and who displays the most oblique approach to his craft.

8. Steve, Louise & Kathy

Aside from the five key performers, a number of other puppeteers have worked on *The Muppet Show*. John Lovelady, Fran Brill, Brian Muehl, Bobby Payne, Betsy Baytos, Karen Prell and Erin Osker have all made contributions to the show at one time or another (in several cases doubling as Muppet designers and builders). Three people in particular, however, deserve special attention. Steve Whitmire, Louise Gold and Kathryn Mullen all joined *The Muppet Show* during the course of its run and, having spent two or more years with the series, have become regular members of the Muppet stock company. As yet they have had little opportunity to develop fully rounded characters of their own, but they have earned the right to be considered members of the varsity squad, and they have become important to the show in a number of different ways.

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As the show has evolved, it has become more complex. Scripts have called for increasing numbers of incidental characters, far more than the veteran puppeteers could handle by themselves. To keep up with this tendency, it has been essential for Jim Henson to find and train new talents, people who can develop the skill and discipline necessary to work with the Muppet ensemble, and who have the dramatic awareness and flexibility to respond to the performances of the senior puppeteers, performances which often vary considerably from take to take.

"There's a lot of ad-libbing on set," says Jane Henson, "and it's not easy to find people who can handle that situation. To work with Frank and Jim, a puppeteer has to be able to react quickly, to think on the run. Even if your character has no lines to speak, you must make it respond to whatever is happening, as soon as it happens."

"There are many proficient puppeteers out there," says Frank Oz, "but they would not necessarily make good Muppet performers. Technically what we do is very complex, we have our own style of performing which calls for a certain looseness. Of all the people we've auditioned over the years, and there have been hundreds, I would say that less than two dozen have stood any real chance of making it, it's that difficult."

Steve Whitmire is probably the most skillful puppeteer, in the traditional sense, to have come to the Muppets since Frank Oz. "Stevie is a wonderful manipulator of puppets," says Jim Henson. "He has tremendous facility and that makes him very valuable to us. If we need someone to make a puppet dance, for example, or to make a dog move like a real dog, Steve is the obvious choice for the job. He has the same kind of basic skills that Frank had when he first joined us. Like Frank when he was young, Steve is rather shy and that holds him back from doing voices, but that will come."

Born in 1959, Steve Whitmire says he doesn't remember a time when he wasn't aware of the Muppets. As a child, in Atlanta, he owned a store-bought Rowlf hand puppet, and he soon began building his own characters, which were, he admits, very Muppet-like. "I always wanted to work with puppets, and to work with the Muppets was the height of my ambition, but I didn't think I would achieve it so quickly."

When he graduated from high school, Whitmire found a job in an Atlanta theme park. "I walked around with a puppet on my arm and talked with kids." After a few months of this he moved on to a children's television show broadcast in the Atlanta area. "It was a very makeshift kind of a show. There was no script to speak of. The kind of thing we did was to take calls from viewers and answer them on the air." At a puppeteers' convention, the first he ever attended, he met Carroll Spinney—*Sesame Street*'s Big Bird and Oscar the Grouch—who was impressed by Whitmire's work and suggested that he audition for *Sesame Street*. Whitmire sent videotapes to New York and not long afterward met with Jane Henson, who was visiting Georgia to inspect the Kermit balloon which was being readied for the Macy's Thanksgiving Day parade. In January 1978 he was invited to New York and there he encountered Jim Henson and Frank Oz for the first time.

"It was my first time in New York," says Whitmire, "and I found it kind of frightening. I wasn't used to New York hours and I showed up at the Muppet building at 8:30 in the morning. The only person there was Jim. He'd been working late the previous night and had slept over. I was there for a couple of days and what I did, for the most part, was work in front of a mirror with Jim and with Frank. They wanted to see if I could make a puppet walk in the right way, if I could make it lip-synch properly, that kind of thing."

Henson and Oz were sufficiently impressed to ask Whitmire to travel to London for

Above: Steve Whitmire with a leonine friend.
Opposite: Whitmire (himself a trumpet player) with Lips the trumpeter up in action with guest star Hal Linden.

89/Steve, Louise & Kathy

Above: During the show starring Roger Moore, Louise Gold brings a fierce-looking pig into shot while Jerry Nelson studies the monitor, awaiting his cue.
Left: Steve Whitmire with Rizzo the Rat.

Sprawled on the floor to stay out of shot, Louise Gold handles Annie Sue during an elaborate production number.

a seven-week tryout with the show. "I felt I had to cut it or else," he recalls. "I was still in a state of shock at having the chance to work with the Muppets—I was only nineteen then—and I felt very lost and isolated in London, but this was what I wanted to do more than anything else and I was determined to make a go of it."

Whitmire already possessed many of the technical skills necessary to make him a valuable Muppet performer, but found that he had to make some major mental adjustments. "I wasn't used to working with a script," he explains. "That took a lot of getting used to. The main problem for me was acquiring the kind of discipline that is necessary to work on a show like this."

Because of his manual dexterity, Whitmire was assigned to Miss Piggy's poodle, Foo-Foo. His most notable creation to date, however, is the ubiquitous Rizzo Rat, a character that has made its presence felt on the show without having recourse to dialogue. "Kathy Mullen built Rizzo," he says, "and I made a few changes to the puppet and began to make clothes for it." Having started life as one of an anonymous group of rats, Rizzo began to take on certain definite personality traits and has presumed to a unique status in the show, popping up in all kinds of scenes—often unscripted—as a sort of uninvited and enigmatic presence. Whitmire's other passion, aside from puppetry, is music, and several new musicians—a trumpeter and a marimba player, for instance—have been assigned to him.

Louise Gold, the only British member of the Muppet company, has also been a considerable asset so far as the musical resources of the troupe are concerned. A volatile redhead with the offstage manner of a latter-day Tallulah Bankhead (though somewhat less restrained), she has been blessed with a voice that carries and a gift for invective that adds a certain spice to life around Studio D. No shrinking violet, Louise Gold—inside one of the Muppet monsters—enlivened one Royal Variety Performance by attempting to embrace Prince Charles.

Born in London, Louise Gold attended the Arts Education School and, before joining the Muppets, worked in repertory theaters in various parts of England. A fine singer with a gift for vocal parody, she is often featured in production numbers. Her most notable characterization on the show has been Annie Sue, Miss Piggy's sweet, young and talented admirer who may well be an Eve Harrington in the making.

Like Louise Gold, Kathy Mullen, a New Yorker, spent several years in the theater before coming to the Muppets, but—unlike her English counterpart—she had had some contact with puppetry along the way. "A friend in New Orleans had a puppet theater, and I worked with her from time to time. It was through her that I first came into contact with the Muppets. I went over to the Muppet workshop looking for a summer job building puppets. Then I found myself helping out on *The Muppet Movie*. It all happened by accident, really."

For some time Kathy Mullen divided her time between the workshop and the studio floor, but eventually her developing ability as a puppeteer led to her becoming a full-time member of the performing troupe. "For some reason," she says, "it's difficult to do both things well. I still like to build something for my own amusement once in a while, but performing takes total concentration. It's hard, working with your arms over your head all day, and you have to learn to use your body as a tool. At my stage of development you have to think about everything you're doing. It doesn't come naturally yet, though there are some days when I can sense what it's like. There's a little click in the back of your mind and you know it's working the way it's supposed to. Apart from the physical and technical side of being a Muppet performer, my biggest problem has been that what we do here is the opposite of what I was trained to do as an actress. My background is in realistic, naturalistic drama, not in the kind of fantasy and comedy that we do on the show, but I love the challenge because you have to lay yourself on the line every day."

Kathy Mullen points out that, although the Muppet performers work with puppets, very few of them have a strong link to the world of the puppet theater. "Frank started out as a pure puppeteer, but he's gone way beyond that. Steve is a puppeteer, but Jerry comes from the stage, Louise comes from the stage, I come from the stage and Richard is just a natural performer. Dave was an industrial designer and Jim, although he has been deeply involved in the puppet theater for many years, and still is, does two million other things besides.

"We all went to a puppet show the other day, and it was quite extraordinary. Many of the people from the shop do have a puppet background, and they were going to sleep, they were so bored. They'd seen it all before. Most of the Muppet performers, on the other hand, were wide-eyed. We were saying, 'Did you see that? How did they do that?' There we were, the best-known group of puppeteers in the world, and we were sitting there with our mouths hanging open."

Above: In the performers' lounge, Kathy Mullen experiments with a new character. At right, she rehearses with guest Paul Simon. Opposite: Kathy Mullen and Bob Payne manipulate a complicated multi-character puppet.

9. The Guest Star

The final performance element in the show, the only one that changes radically from week to week, is the guest star. Exactly how important this element is is a matter of some disagreement within the Muppet world. "Jerry Juhl and I," says Jim Henson, "have an ongoing debate as to the relative importance of the guest star. My feeling is that the guest star is very important indeed. I tend to think of every show as being built around that individual guest. Jerry, on the other hand, feels that the emphasis should always be on the Muppets themselves." "It's my impression," says Jerry Juhl, "that people tune in to the show to see the Muppets. As a general rule, people do not tell me, 'I loved the show that starred so-and-so.' They say, 'I loved the show in which Fozzie did such-and-such.'

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Rudolf Nureyev amuses himself at the expense of Sam the Eagle, who is about to be thwarted once again in his dream of bringing culture to the show.

I think the guests serve a purpose, but I believe that the Muppets are what this show is about, and I think the other writers are all in agreement with me about this."

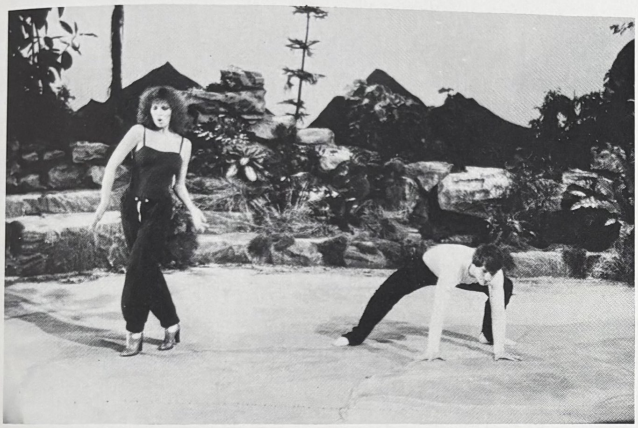
"The guests are thirty, forty, fifty percent of the show," in David Lazer's estimation. "As we've moved toward theme shows and book shows, their importance has increased. People do tune in to see the guest. They want to see what Diana Ross or Liza Minnelli or Rudolf Nureyev is going to do with the Muppets."

"From the writers' point of view," continues Jerry Juhl, "the Muppets have to be more important. They give the series its continuity. People tune in week after week because Kermit and Piggy and Gonzo and the rest are real to them. The viewer cares about what is going to happen to those characters. That's what makes the show work."

"As far as I'm concerned," says Henson, "the guest is crucial because he or she draws the viewer into the show. The guest gives us credibility, especially with new viewers. If Raquel Welch believes in the Muppets, the audience believes in the Muppets. In the studio it's up to us to *make* the guest believe in our characters. Sometimes a guest will relate to *us* rather than to the characters—he starts talking to Kermit's feet—and we have to overcome that, but having a different guest every week keeps us on our toes. The guests prevent us from going stale."

"A problem with some guest stars," says Jerry Juhl, "is that they have strong ideas about the show—about what they'd like to do on it—and those ideas are not exactly original. Almost everyone wants to work with Piggy, and sometimes that's fine, but often we'd feel much happier if we could match that guest up with another puppet. I think we generally do our best work when we're given a completely free hand, as happened with Glenda Jackson, for example. We asked her if there was anything she would like to do and she said, 'You people know what you're up to. I'll do anything you write for me.'"

"Sometimes a star can make a big contribution to the script," Henson insists. "Harry Belafonte was enthusiastic about doing the show, but he wanted to be sure it was



Above: Guest star Raquel Welch rehearses scenes with Miss Piggy and with a dancer who will play the role of a giant spider.
Left: The camera catches Diana Ross singing "Last Time I Saw Him" with the Electric Mayhem Band.

The Great Gonzo introduces opera star Beverly Sills to one of the more esoteric aspects of his art.

The Muppet Show has featured guest stars from many different branches of show business and the performing arts, personalities ranging from Beverly Sills to Elton John, and from Rudolf Nureyev to Peter Sellers. Often the most successful shows have been those in which the guest stars were placed in situations where the audience would never expect to find them.

The Muppet Show provided an ideal vehicle for Peter Sellers, who used it to demonstrate the extraordinary range of his comic versatility.

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Left and below: Personalities as varied as Monty Python's John Cleese, Edgar Bergen and Blondie's Deborah Harry, all quite at home with the Muppets.

worthwhile, and he worked very closely with us, which led to some wonderful things like the piece with the African masks."

Jerry Juhl agrees about the Harry Belafonte edition of the show, and points to John Cleese as another example of a collaboration that paid off. "John and I rewrote the script together three times—in fact, we may have rewritten it once too often—but he's a superb comedy writer, so that was only appropriate. From my point of view, instances like that are the exception to the rule."

Probably this debate has strengthened the show, since the net result has been that the guest star's role has been strengthened over the years, but not at the expense of the Muppets, because Jerry Juhl and the other writers are always fighting to make sure that the regulars are not short-changed. Certainly the writers have had varied guests to work with—everyone from Beverly Sills to Alice Cooper—and after the booking problems of the first season, the Henson organization has been faced with an embarrassment of riches when it comes to selecting stars.

"It seems that everyone wants to work with the Muppets," says David Lazer, explaining the process that is followed when casting guests. "People have given up lucrative personal appearances, have even had their contracts rewritten, so they could come on the show. We begin by drawing up lists, then a little group of us—Jim, Jerry Juhl, Frank and myself—sit down to discuss the possibilities, and we regularly consult with Bernie Brillstein. We look for international stars, of course, and there were certain show-business institutions—George Burns, Edgar Bergen, Peter Sellers, Zero Mostel, people like that—that everyone here wanted to work with. We tend to go for people who don't do much television, or for television stars who can do things other than what they're best known for. If we find that the lead in a dramatic series can also sing and dance, that's promising. We want to give the viewers something they don't see every day."

Jim Henson amplifies this statement: "We've used lots of recording-industry stars because you don't see them on TV that often, certainly not playing comedy. We just finished working with Debbie Harry of Blondie, and on the show she sings 'Rainbow Connection' as a duet with Kermit. I think the kids who are fans of Blondie will find that unusual and interesting, and that's the kind of thing we're always after. Rudolf Nureyev sang and tap-danced on the show. Linda Ronstadt delivered lines for the first time. For the most part, we've avoided people who do a lot of guest spots, though we do make exceptions."

Bookings are made through the Bernie Brillstein Office; then, about six weeks before a show is scheduled for taping, David Lazer and Jerry Juhl make telephone contact with the guest.

"We try to find out if they have any ideas about what they might do on the show," says Lazer. "If there's a particular song the guest wants to sing, and if there's a viable and interesting way to do it with the Muppets, we'll try to work it in, but the guest doesn't see a script until he arrives in London the Friday before taping is due to begin. Then a bound script, with the guest's name on it, is delivered to his hotel."

Linda Lavin, of *Alice*, guested on the show during the fourth season and recalls her initial contacts with Jerry Juhl and Lazer:

"They called a few weeks before I was due to go to London, and asked if there was anything I particularly wanted to do. I told them I'd like to do a scene with Piggy, because I felt that I understood that character—we're both driven women, you know! I said I'd like to do a number with the band, the Electric Mayhem, and something with

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the Swedish Chef. I remember that Jerry Juhl was delighted about that because he said no one ever asks to work with the Chef.

"Before going to London, I decided to spoil myself and spent a few days in Paris, at the Ritz, and while I was there I caught a cold. You have to understand that I was so anxious to work with the Muppets—I'd wanted to do this show for three years—that when I got to London I didn't tell anyone about the cold because I didn't want to spoil things. I felt that if anyone found out about it, they might send me home! On my first day in London, David Lazer came to my hotel and within five minutes I felt I'd known him all my life. We walked over to the apartment Ray Charles was renting, and Jim was there and we rehearsed musical numbers for a couple of hours. Fortunately you can buy codeine in London, so I had the cold under control for the time being.

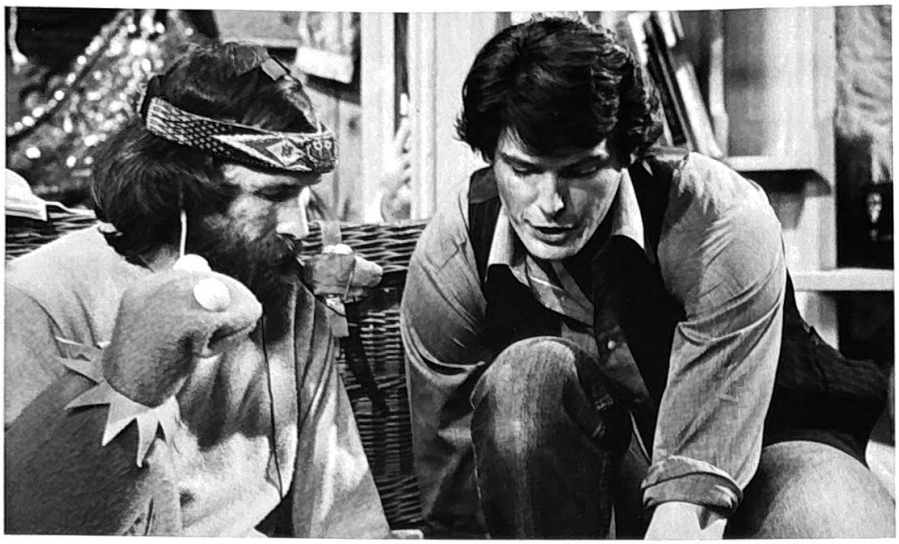
"We also talked about costumes for the show. I had brought only one dress that was appropriate, so the next day, Saturday, Ann Hollowood, from the costume department, came to the hotel with Dave Goelz and we spent the day shopping. We went to Harrods, then Annie called Zandra Rhodes and we went to see her and she put together an outfit for me. That was a delightful experience. I was beginning to get a sense of everybody being very friendly, very informal. The cold was getting worse, and I was still pretending it didn't exist, but everyone—starting with David Lazer—was working to put me at ease.

"On Sunday morning Lord Grade's car picked me up and drove me to the studio. On the way Richard Hunt's little VW passed us—the driver told me who he was—and he waved and winked, so I felt comfortable with him before I even met him. At the studio Dave Lazer took me up to the big rehearsal room and we read through the script. Afterward I worked with Frank Oz on my scene with Miss Piggy, but I kept feeling there was something missing—it lacked a sense of panic which should have been there—and I remember being moved by Frank's seriousness, by his lack of frivolity. I had not known quite what to expect, and I was very conscious of the fact that there was a lot to do in a short time, but Frank set up a feeling of intimacy and he let me know that I didn't have to feel locked into anything, that there was time to change. Right away I was tremendously impressed with him. I've worked with some very good actors, and, in my opinion, Frank is up there with the best of them. He knows exactly what he's doing, his intuitions are extraordinary and he's prepared to take risks.

"I think it was the next day, at the pre-recording session, that I finally admitted that I had a terrible cold. Jim told me not to worry about it. By this time I was beginning to feel like part of the family. This was a big week for everybody, because *The Muppet Movie* was opening with a Royal gala premiere. They could have been very preoccupied, but they encouraged me to spend time with them, to be part of whatever they were doing.

"On Tuesday I arrived at the studio to find a huge birthday-cake set—the show was about Kermit's birthday—which was maybe fifteen feet high, and I have a problem with heights. I told Jim, and the carpenters built up a parapet so I felt more secure. That production number on the cake was very elaborate. There was a kind of spiral ramp, and I had to work my way down it, singing, while a whole crowd of Muppets was going up. Frank Oz was performing Fozzie Bear, and every time we passed, Fozzie would give me a little, intimate touch on the shoulder. After this happened a few times, I responded as I would have to a real person who was taking a liberty—I gave Fozzie an elbow in the ribs. Frank didn't miss a beat. He had Fozzie

Opposite: Linda Lavin's appearance on The Muppet Show included a musical outing with the Electric Mayhem and an elaborate production number celebrating Kermit's birthday.



On the backstage set, Christopher Reeve discusses his lines with Jim Henson.

do a double take, then Fozzie chased me down the ramp, put his thumbs to his ears and went 'Yaaaaa . . .' It was perfect.

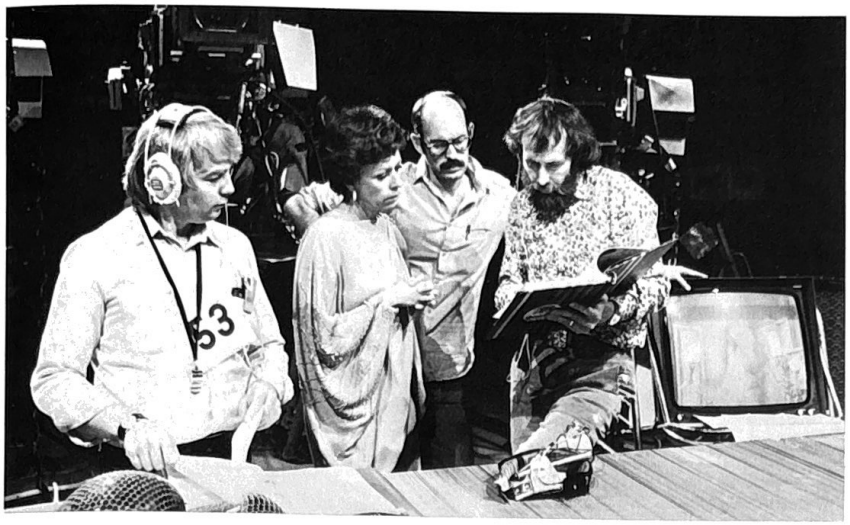
"There were other moments like that. I was standing next to Louise Gold, waiting to do a scene, and I was feeling a little nervous. Louise was operating a chicken and she offered me a wing to hold, as if it was the most natural thing in the world. That was very reassuring.

"Then it was time to do my big scene with Miss Piggy, and it still wasn't working—it just wasn't resolving itself properly. I had the feeling that what I really wanted to do was to slap Piggy's face. That was what the scene demanded, but how could I do that? Miss Piggy's a superstar! I was censoring myself. We worked on the scene some more and Frank said, 'How would you like to slap her face?' He was thinking the same thing I was, and that gave the button to the scene. I slapped her and she said, 'Thanks, I needed that!' I said, 'Now I'll go out and do your number for you.' Then Frank had Miss Piggy turn to the camera and ad-lib, 'Hmm, it must have been the slap.' That made it work. When you're extemporizing, knowing when to end the scene is the key thing. Frank has that knack. Working with the Muppets is not dissimilar to working with an improvisational group like Second City."

Christopher Reeve, another fourth-season guest, came to the show under very different circumstances, but many of his comments echo Linda Lavin's.

"I had known most of the Muppet people—Jim, Frank, Richard, Dave and the rest—for a couple of years," he explains, "because I was in London making *Superman* and we were on the same social circuit, along with the *Star Wars* gang and some of the *Monty Python* crowd. Gay, my girl friend, and I got to be particularly good friends with Frank Oz. We would have junk-food dinners together, with fried chicken and chili and hamburgers and American ice cream—all those good things it's difficult to find over there. Because of this, I had been out to Elstree several times to watch them work. I had done some voices for the show and when Bob Hope was the guest I even carried a Japanese pole-vaulter in a crowd scene.

"When it came to be my turn to do the show, I felt a bit awkward to find myself taking center stage, but that didn't last long because I was so comfortable with their way of working. They create an atmosphere on the set which allows for improvisation,



Above: Between takes, guest star Carol Burnett chats with David Lazer.
Left: On set, Carol Burnett looks over the script with Richard Holloway, Frank Oz and Jim Henson.

for winging it, and that's exactly what I feel at home with. A good deal of the dialogue in *Superman* was extemporary. The big scene on Lois Lane's terrace, for example—everyone seems to remember that one—was largely improvised.

"There's a sort of controlled madness on the *Muppet Show* set, but there's never any doubt that Jim, in his unassuming way, is always in charge. I remember being struck by his apparent ability to be everywhere at the same time, and by his refusal to be rushed. I had a Hamlet scene and we were having some problems with it. One of the ATV people was pushing to get the scene done before lunch, but Jim wouldn't hear of it. He insisted that we take our time and get it right. The level of ensemble playing is extraordinary too. Jim and Frank are the outstanding performers, of course, but there's a remarkably uniform level of talent and no deadweight. I remember watching a whole group of puppeteers working with a talking horse. Their ability to synchronize their movements was amazing.

"I think one of their secrets is their attention to detail. I remember a scene in which Dave Goelz was manipulating Beauregard, the stagehand, in the background. Beauregard was sweeping up and he came across a flower on the floor. Instead of throwing it away, he picked it up and put it in his buttonhole. That wasn't in the script, and maybe no one would notice it on screen, but it was in character, so Dave had Beauregard do it.

"When the puppeteers are working, each one's body becomes an extension of the character he is playing. The character is not something that exists just from the puppeteer's elbow up."

Carol Burnett, who guested during the fifth season, was struck by precisely the same thing.

"When I wasn't needed on set, I watched them from the floor, and you can see why the Muppets come to life, because these people *become* those characters. They are not just puppeteers, they are actors, and very good ones.

"I've guested on many shows and everyone has their way of doing things, but when I got home after taping *The Muppet Show* I found myself telling everyone, 'They work so much the way *we* do!' I felt very comfortable because the atmosphere was so much the same as the atmosphere had been on our show, but I think a guest would feel

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Season

Raquel Welch

Elke Sommer

Danny Kaye

Liberace

Gilda Radner

Jean Stapleton

James Coco

Spike Milligan

Alice Cooper

Dale Evans & Roy Rogers

Leo Sayer

Roger Miller

III

Sylvester Stallone

Pearl Bailey

Roy Clark

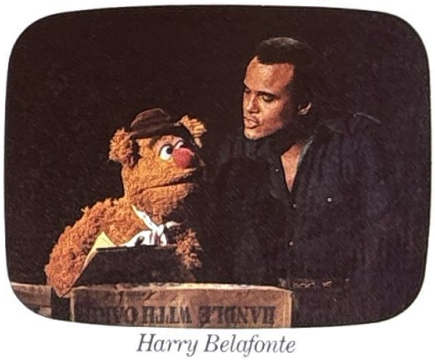
Marisa Berenson

Leslie Uggams

Rita Coolidge & Kris Kristofferson

Lynn Redgrave

Loretta Lynn



Harry Belafonte

Lesley Ann Warren

Helen Reddy

Cheryl Ladd

Left: Singer Crystal Gayle trots on a treadmill surrounded by an assortment of Muppets and Muppet performers for her hit "River Road."
Below: At the climax of a production number, Elton John stares, through his trademark glasses, into the deadly jaws of a crocodile.
Opposite: Melissa Manchester performs a torrid Spanish dance with Link Hogthrob while Jim Henson checks the monitor.

comfortable anyway because they're very organized, but within that structure everything is very loose. Things can be changed right up to the last minute, and there are no displays of temperament, so doing the show is an utter joy. Jim Henson could probably phone the show in, but he's always there, always on top of things. I was surprised to see that he would perform so many minor characters, anonymous creatures who are just doing some little bit of business in the background.

"When Kermit is up there, staring you in the face, you believe in him completely. I feel that Kermit has a soul. As for Animal, I had to dance with Animal and I had no difficulty believing in him either because I was *terrified* of Animal!"

The relationship that can develop between the guest star and the Muppet characters is perhaps summed up by a story that Ethel Merman tells.

"During a break Frank Oz came over to me with Fozzie Bear on his arm. 'Arh, excuse me, Miss Merman,' Fozzie says, 'do you think I'd be attractive without my fedora?' 'Why, of course you would be,' I tell him. 'You're a very attractive bear.' 'You think so?' he asks, and he takes off the hat. 'Very attractive,' I tell him, and we went on like this for five minutes, maybe more, before I said to myself, 'What *is* this? You're having a conversation with a bear!' It was the most natural thing in the world."

As already noted, Harry Belafonte was a guest who—contrary to the norm—was very involved in the planning of the show in which he was to appear.

"I seldom do television appearances," he explains, "but I have always had the highest regard for Jim Henson's taste and artistry, so when I was invited to be a guest on *The Muppet Show*, I saw that this might be an opportunity to do something very worthwhile. I had a long talk with Jim in California at about the time he was beginning work on *The Muppet Movie*, and—given that I have a more than casual interest in Third World music—I proposed to him that the show might provide the occasion to take a look at the lore and history of other worlds, other places. Jim was very enthusiastic—he felt that the show could provide a legitimate platform for this kind of material—but he thought, quite rightly I believe, that there should be standard material too, to draw the audience in.

"Back in New York, I put together a tape of songs from all over the world. Finally I talked over a selection of four songs with Jim and David Lazer, and we settled on 'Turn the World Around,' which has the theme, 'We come from fire, earth, water; we go back to fire, earth, water.' Some of Jim's people had been doing background research, and the idea was that I would do the song with a chorus of African masks which would be modeled very closely on real African masks, though Jim was extremely careful in selecting the models because he didn't want to cause offense by choosing masks that would have some religious or national significance.

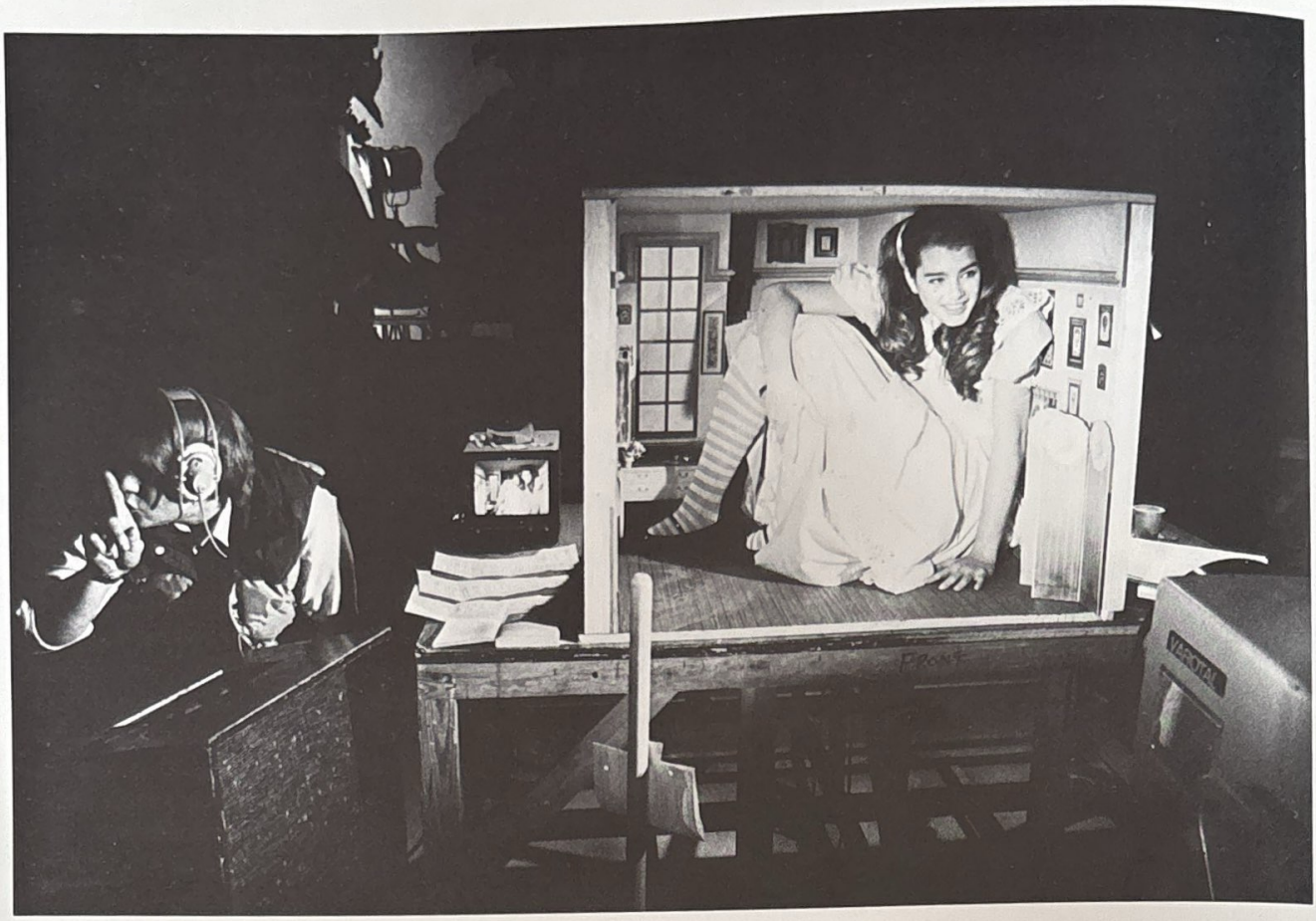
"At this point I made my commitment to do the show and it was agreed that I would sing 'Banana Boat' and have a drum duel with Animal, because Animal is a favorite character of mine.

"Shortly after, I flew to London, and on my first day at the studio we all sat down and read through the script. Well, I was very distressed! I thought, 'Oh, God—it sounds so dry, so dull, so wrong! Why is everyone so calm? Why doesn't anyone else understand that this is just awful? Where did things go astray? Did I fail to articulate my ideas?'

"Everyone took a break, and I didn't know what to say, but after the break they came back with the characters—with Fozzie, with Animal, with Kermit—and we started going over scenes again. I was stunned! Everything was changed. The lines that had sounded so dreadful before came to life, and from that point on everything was fine. The next three or four days were marvelous. I learned so much.

"Jim gave me sound guidance. He directs people by setting the limitations within which a performer should work within a given scene. He puts you at ease, and he's

Above: Kermit and Gonzo confront Carol Burnett while at right Ethel Merman jokes with Fozzie Bear. Opposite and below: Harry Belafonte sings with a chorus of African masks and engages in a drum duel with Animal.



always open to suggestions, though I found I had very few. If my suggestion was good, he accepted it without question. If he rejected a suggestion, he would always explain why it wouldn't work.

"I recall that we rehearsed a scene—it didn't appear in the final cut of the show—in which I was required to argue with one of the Muppets. It didn't work and Jim explained to me that a certain kind of anger never could work in the Muppet world, no matter what kind of mischief you were reacting to, because the characters are incapable of acting in a truly immoral way, they are free of greed and avarice and all those things that afflict the human condition. Once I understood that, everything became easy."

"Each guest is a new challenge," says Jim Henson. "Sometimes you'll book a star who wants to fly in, get the job done as quickly as possible, then fly out again. Other times, though, the guest becomes involved in what we're doing. Brooke Shields loved to work in the shop. When we didn't need her on set, she was in there building a puppet. There was a day when she didn't have a call, but she asked if she could come in anyway and spent the entire day in the workshop."

"It's been our policy," says David Lazer, "that each star appears only once, there have been no repeats, but we stay in touch with them. You can become very attached to somebody in a few days, and each guest has given us a unique set of opportunities. Without them the show would have been very different."

Opposite: Richard Holloway calls for silence while Brooke Shields, as Alice in Wonderland, squeezes herself into a miniature set. The camera's view of the set up can be seen on the small monitor.
Right: Brooke Shields has a hug for the Mad Hatter, alias the Great Gonzo.
Below: Bob Hope settles himself astride a Muppet steed, a Michael Frith study for which appears opposite. In the on-set photograph, Richard Hunt and Dave Goelz are just visible beneath the horse's hooves.

10. Shaping the Show

Much of the work that goes into the shaping of *The Muppet Show* takes place in the five or six weeks that separate the first contact with the guest star and the guest's arrival in London. Generally speaking, an upcoming show is first discussed at length at the Thursday lunch meeting when Jim Henson, Jerry Juhl and the rest of the writing staff sit down with the music consultant and Frank Oz to block out the initial concept for the script. "I think," says Henson at the beginning of one such meeting, "that the idea of building the Marty Feldman script around episodes from different historical periods is definitely out. Mel Brooks is making his *History of the World: Part One* and Marty has worked with Mel so often. I think the idea is just too close."

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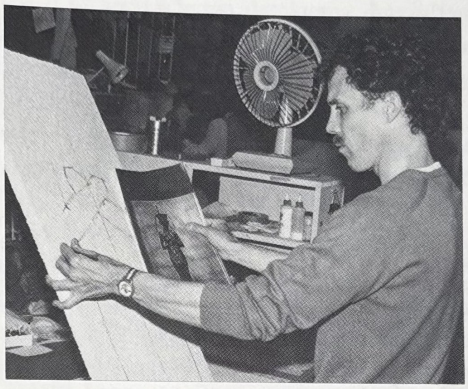
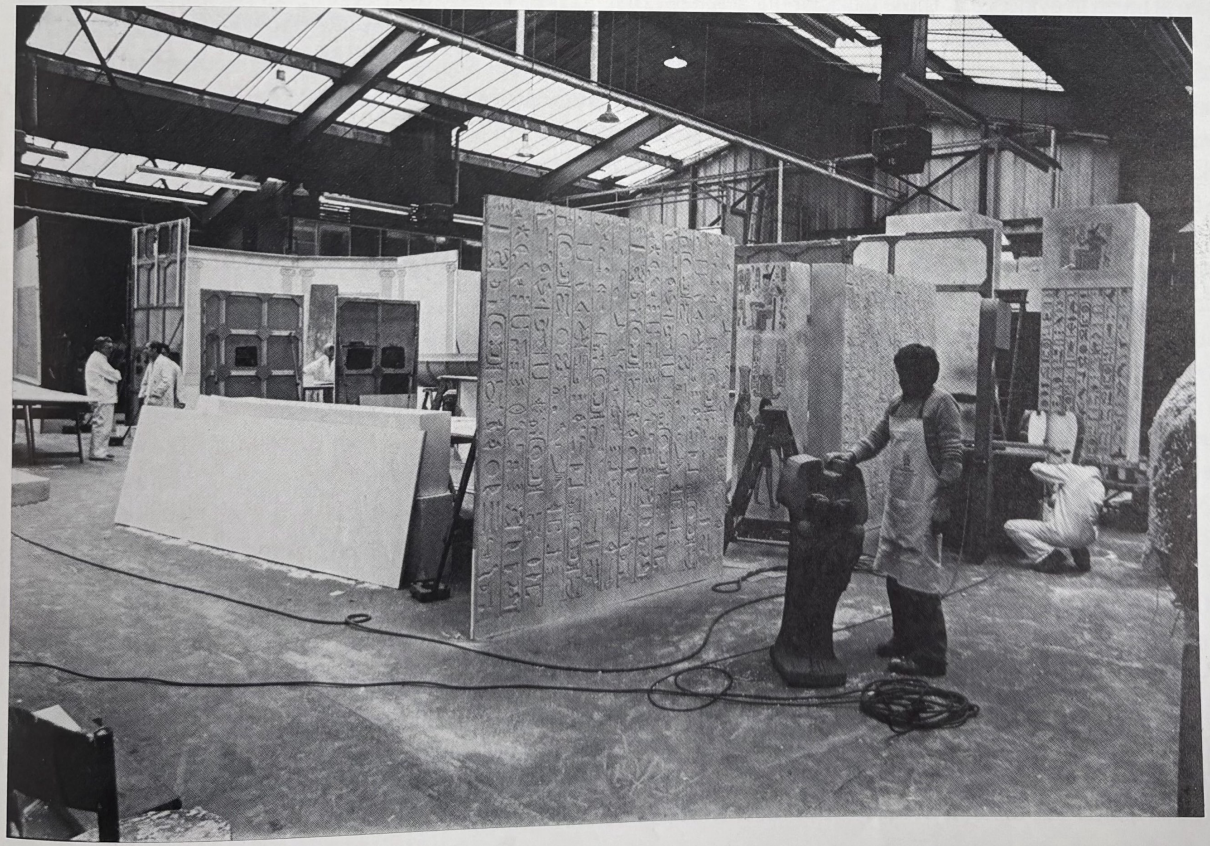
The ambitious production numbers seen on The Muppet Show demand elaborate sets. For this ancient Egyptian number, singing mummy cases and an entire tomb decorated with hieroglyphs had to be created.



Left and below: Preparations for this number involved the skills of dozens of designers, set builders and Muppet builders, hundreds of man hours going into a performance that would be on screen for just a couple of minutes.
Opposite: On the completed set, Jerry Nelson, top, Louise Gold, Steve Whitmire and Richard Hunt bring mummy cases and archaeologists to life.



"Another idea we talked about," says Jerry Juhl, "is *The Arabian Nights.*"

"*The Arabian Nights* could be good. It would give us plenty of material to work with."

"Marty could play all kinds of different parts. He could be a caliph, he could be a slave girl."

"What about the continuity? Should this be a book show, or just a theme show?"

"Well, the original has the princess telling a different story every night to save her neck. Maybe we could stay with that general format."

"Piggy as the princess?"

"Perhaps."

"I can see Gonzo on a flying carpet. He gets it in the air but doesn't know how to bring it down, so he keeps whooshing through, completely out of control."

"What about an 'Open Sesame' gag? The Muppets can't do an *Arabian Nights* show without using that. Marty walks up to the cave and says, 'Open Sesame,' and inside is the whole *Sesame Street* gang."

"You mean, bring over Big Bird and everyone?"

"Frank and I can do Bert and Ernie. We could fly over the Count for Jerry and Don Music for Richard. No problem."

"What about musical numbers?"

"'The Sheik of Araby . . .'"

"'The Genie with the Light Brown Hair . . .'"

"How about 'Jeanie with the Light Brown Roots'?"

"And don't forget 'Harry with the Light Brown Jeans.'"

Henson's voice is much in evidence at these blocking-out sessions. His responsibilities elsewhere prevent him from sitting down with the other writers more than a couple of times a week, but he remains in touch with what they are doing by means of frequent discussions with Jerry Juhl, who is often to be found in the workshop or on the studio floor, anywhere a hurried script conference can be convened.

Having worked alongside Jim Henson for two decades, and having been Frank Oz's partner before that, Jerry Juhl has been one of the central figures in the development of the Muppets. "I'm the Muppets' biggest fan," he says. "If it wasn't for the Muppets, I doubt if I'd have much interest in writing for television, and I certainly wouldn't be writing television comedy. We have a unique situation here. We're not answerable to network executives or standards-and-practices people. Everything comes down to a very close-knit group of people. If Frank has an idea for Piggy, we talk it over. If Dave Goelz has been given a new character to work with and he's not happy with it, he comes to me and says, 'There's nothing in there for me.' Everyone listens to everyone else, there's no big clash of egos.

"Sometimes we steal material from what happens here at the studio. One week, when two key members of the production team left the show, there was a very emotional farewell party with people on the verge of tears. That led directly to the show in which Gonzo announced that he was going to quit the Muppet Theater.

"The humor of *The Muppet Show* is unusual in that the innocence of the characters allows us to use bad jokes in a way that makes them funny. We have a rule of thumb which says, 'A joke that isn't good enough to use once may be bad enough to use three times.' Often the repetition makes it funny. The *good* bad joke is always a matter of judgment. I remember Jim pondering an especially awful pun and I asked him, 'What's the matter, don't you like it?' He thought about it for a moment, then said, 'The joke is

Above: At top, Muppets are seen in costume for a number with an Arabian Nights theme. Below, writer turned guest star, Chris Langham, consults with the Great Gonzo.

perfectly terrible, but it's worthy of us.' "

"Apart from his grasp of character and structure," says Henson, "Jerry's great strengths are speed and flexibility. A lot of comedy writers are fast, but no one's faster than Jerry and I've never met one who is so adaptable. He understands the importance of that in the kind of ensemble work we do."

For his part, Jerry Juhl assesses the strengths of his fellow writers as follows:

"Don Hinkley is the only one of us who has a background in prime-time television—he's written for Steve Allen, Flip Wilson, Carol Burnett—and he's a master of the gag. He builds jokes the way the Swiss build watches. Everything is believable and logical till the last syllable. Nobody is better than Don with a *good* bad joke. Since he joined the show, he's written almost every episode of 'Vet's Hospital' and a lot of Fozzie's monologues.

"David Odell is strong all around. His background is in movie writing and I think he found the pace of writing for television demanded a considerable adjustment, but he's valuable to us because he likes the Muppets and he understands them. The rest of us are rather intuitive in our approach, but David is logical and intellectual. He analyzes everything, and for that reason he is usually the first to spot potential problems in a script.

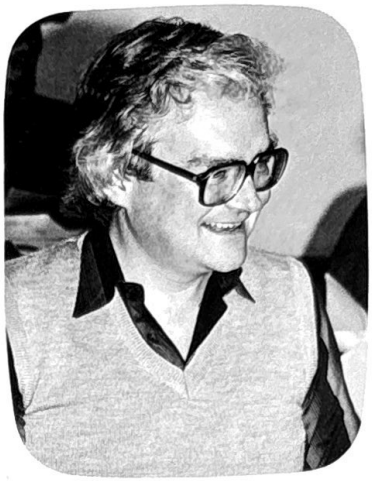
"Chris Langham contributes a lot of the wild stuff. I had been looking for a British writer because I wanted to plug into that off-the-wall school of British humor—the kind of thing that derives from *The Goon Show* and *Monty Python*—and John Cleese recommended Chris. He had worked with John and with Spike Milligan, and with Ken Cambell he wrote a fifteen-hour science-fiction play which was put on at the National Theater. Besides that, he's a very funny performer."

A connoisseur of cryptic T-shirts ("Paul McCartney and Wings: 1980 Japanese Tour"), satin baseball jackets and crumpled chinos, Chris Langham stepped in front of the cameras during the fifth season to become the show's guest star.

"Chris has a highly developed sense of the absurd," says Jerry Juhl. "I went to Los Angeles to receive Writers' Guild awards on behalf of the writing staff, and I brought Chris's back to England wrapped for protection in a shopping bag from a Von's supermarket. Chris said that he appreciated the award, but found the Von's bag a more interesting cultural artifact, so he hung the award on his wall *inside* the bag."

Since music is so integral a part of *The Muppet Show*, that too must be considered from the very outset. In planning the musical content, Jim Henson works closely with a musical consultant and a musical associate. The musical consultant's task is to supply information and make suggestions. He must have an encyclopedic knowledge of music—from opera to rock 'n' roll—and must know the capabilities of the guest stars. Larry Grossman, a veteran of many Hollywood shows, filled this role for the first three seasons, and Ray Charles, best known to the public as leader of the Ray Charles Singers, took over for years four and five. As musical associate since the show began, Derek Scott has been a key figure, contributing ideas and looking after the day-to-day business of commissioning arrangements, accompanying guest stars and generally making sure that the musical side of the production runs smoothly.

As the script begins to take shape, other departments enter the picture. The workshop staff begins to build whatever special puppets are needed for the upcoming show, the director begins to familiarize himself with the material that is being written, special props are obtained and the ATV design department starts work on the sets that will be needed.



Head writer, Jerry Juhl, has worked with the Muppets since 1961.

When he first saw the set for "Pigs in Space," Jim Henson was horrified. By all established standards, it was much too large for the puppets. But the use of a very wide angle lens overcame the problem.

At the outset of the series the design department was faced with a considerable challenge. David Chandler, the department head, recalls that he met with Henson a few weeks before the pilot shows were scheduled to be taped. After some preliminary discussions about the major permanent sets, Chandler promised to deliver sketches in a week. Henson explained, apologetically, that he had to return to New York in two days. Working at top speed, and basing his ideas to a large extent on the toy-theater designs that used to be known in England as "penny plain, tuppence colored," Chandler came up with a basic concept that Henson liked very much.

"We quickly learned," says Chandler, "that designing for the Muppets has its own special set of problems. Take the backstage set, for example. We knew it had to be built on platforms and that we had to provide room for the puppeteers to work, also it had to look old and used, but the big problem was scale. If you look carefully at that set, you'll see that the staircase is full size but the doors at the top of the stairs are about seven-eighths the size of a regular door. The whole thing has to work for both

guest stars and puppets. That's not easy to achieve. And then where do you find the props that fit in with all this? You need miniatures. We had people scouring antique shops and junk stores all over London. Luckily, we discovered that there were many beautiful Victorian toys, detailed just like the real things they were modeled on, which were the perfect size.

"It's very important that the sets look naturalistic. The viewer has to believe that the Muppet Theater is a real place. Also we have always had to be careful about the color, keeping it low-keyed to set off the stylization of the Muppets."

"Today," said Jim Henson, "we have designers like David Chandler, Malcolm Stone, Leigh Malone and Brian Holgate who know exactly what we need, but in the early days there were a lot of scale problems. I remember that the first time I saw the 'Pigs in Space' set I was horrified. There was enough room in there to play basketball, but we overcame the problem by using a very wide-angle lens."

As the show goes into production, the director's role becomes crucial. Sitting in the control booth, watching an array of monitors, he is responsible for translating what happens on the studio floor into the video image that is recorded on tape for eventual transmission. "We like to shoot in long takes," Henson explains, "so we can sustain the dramatic tension, which means that all the camera movements and edits have to be planned carefully in advance, and the director has to oversee this. I am in constant touch with him through Richard Holloway, our floor manager, so he is aware of what we're doing on the floor, and of course I can see on the monitor what *he's* doing. There are special technical considerations on a show like this, so it's vital that the director understands exactly how we work. We've been very lucky to have Peter Harris and Philip Casson. Peter, in particular, has been an important part of the success of the show. He has been with us from the first season, he's devoted to the Muppets, and he helped in the evolution of the style of the show."

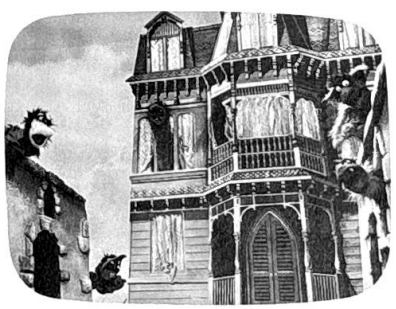
The director's role continues after the show has been taped, since, in collaboration with videotape editor John Hawkins, and in consultation with Jim Henson, it is his responsibility to put the material into its final shape. While one show is being shot, another is being edited and half a dozen more are in various stages of pre-production. For eight weeks at a stretch the whole process is repeated every seven days, then—after a one-week hiatus—it begins all over again.

The repetition of the process is in itself a factor in the shaping of the show. It is not only the writers and performers who have come to know the characters better as the series has progressed, who have become more familiar with the possibilities inherent in each situation.

As the individual puppeteer becomes the extension of the character he is performing, so the whole production team—Henson and ATV employees alike—has become an extension of the characters considered as an ensemble. It is because of these puppets that these men and women came together in the first place, and it is because these puppets developed characters and interacted together successfully that the production team has stayed together. In a very real sense, then, the Muppets themselves—Kermit, Piggy, Gonzo, Fozzie and the rest—are as much responsible for shaping the show as any of the humans who have helped bring them to life.

The Muppets have this power to mold their own material because we perceive them as real. If Jim Henson were to abandon puppetry tomorrow, the characters that he and his associates have created would continue to have an independent existence in the collective imagination of their audience.

A set for the production number "A Comedy Tonight" from the Broadway hit A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum.



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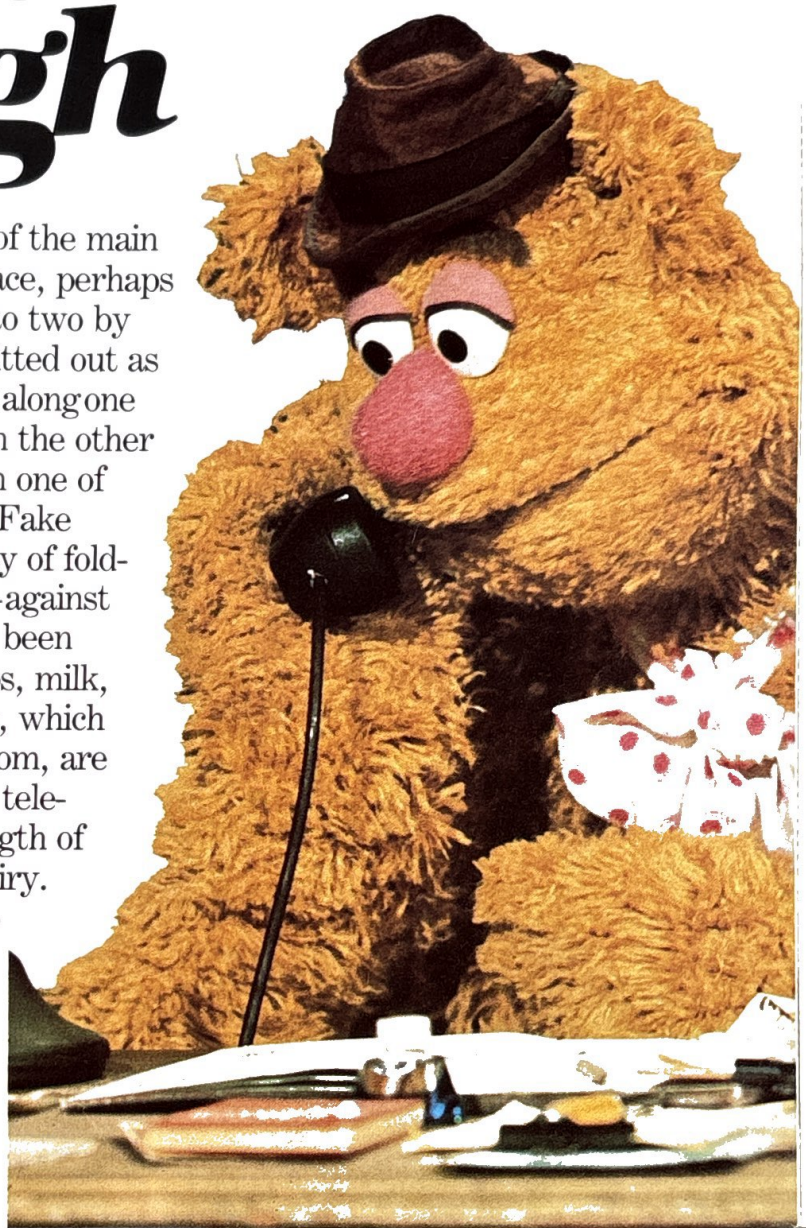
1. Read-Through

Rehearsal Room 7/8, on the fourth floor of the main building at ATV Studios, is a loft-like space, perhaps ninety feet long, which can be divided into two by means of a folding partition. One end is fitted out as a dance studio, with floor-to-ceiling mirrors along one wall and a bar for stretching exercises. In the other half of the space are two grand pianos (on one of which someone has inscribed the words "Fake Steinway"), several metal tables, a variety of folding and upright chairs, an old desk and—against one wall—a wooden table on which have been installed an electric kettle, Styrofoam cups, milk, instant coffee and tea bags. In one corner, which can be curtained off to form a dressing room, are a battered sofa, a large wall mirror and a telephone. With windows running the full length of one wall, this rehearsal area is light and airy. Outside, beyond the parking lot, is a complex of municipal housing decorated with graffiti celebrating the memory of the Sex Pistols.



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On the band stage, Linda Ronstadt runs through a song accompanied by Derek Scott at the piano while Jack Parnell, with baton, conducts the orchestra.

By 10:30 on an overcast Sunday morning two dozen people—performers, writers, shop personnel, representatives of the ATV production crew—are gathered in this rehearsal room for the "read-through" of this week's script. Six of the metal tables have been placed together to form an open rectangle, while another table and the ancient desk have been set apart on either side of the rectangle. A production secretary hands out scripts, each consisting of sixty or so sheets of blue paper. Jim Henson, wearing a sweater that has a row of Kermits worked into the design, confers with Jerry Juhl, and gradually people settle themselves at the various tables, some of the puppeteers studying their scripts, making notes in the margins.

Just before 10:35 David Lazer enters the room with this week's guest star, Linda Ronstadt. The next few minutes are given over to an important ritual as the guest is introduced individually to everyone present; this is the only chance that many people who work behind the scenes will have to meet her. Then she too takes her place at the rectangle of tables, between Henson and Lazer, and Jerry Juhl—seated opposite them—announces, "Okay, we'll read this script through."

He adjusts his glasses and begins:

"Muppet Show number one hundred and nineteen. Cold opening. Linda, Pops and the marionette moth. Linda enters."

"Who're you?" asks Jerry Nelson, in character as Pops.

"I'm Linda Ronstadt," reads the guest star. "I'm gonna be the guest on your show."

And so they proceed, with Jerry Juhl handling the continuity and stage directions and the performers taking their own lines, always in character. The purpose of this

read-through is to enable the star and the puppeteers to familiarize themselves with their lines, but it also gives the workshop staff an opportunity to double-check which puppets and costumes will be needed, and it affords the production team a chance to acquaint themselves with, for example, any unusual props or special effects that may be called for. Since many of the people present are seeing the finished script for the first time, there is a good deal of spontaneous laughter. At a little before 11:15 Statler and Waldorf—Richard Hunt and Jim Henson—exchange their closing barbs and a brief tea break is called.

After the break a smaller group—about a dozen people—gathers around one of the pianos where Derek Scott is running over an arrangement of "Blue Bayou." The guest star, accompanied by her record producer, Peter Asher, joins the group at the piano and begins to sing along with Derek. Her manner is relaxed and casual. "I can phrase this any way you like," she says. "Would you like it just the way that I do it on the record?"

"She really sings good!" says Richard Hunt, slipping into Janice's flower-child drawl.

Rehearsals and discussions continue till 1:30, when a lunch break is called. From the rehearsal room Jim Henson proceeds to the editing room. Richard Holloway accompanies him and they join Peter Harris, John Hawkins and production assistant Sue Paul, who are working on the final cut of the show that stars Brooke Shields, the theme of which is *Alice in Wonderland.* The scene under consideration is a Muppet version of the Mad Hatter's tea party.

"We needed another edit right there," says Peter Harris as they watch the action on a monitor.

Jim nods.

"It can pass, though," he says. "What's bothering me is how can we pick up Brooke's entry. It needs something. Can we do it with music?"

"We could try that," says Peter.

Jim remains in the editing room for about ten minutes, then heads for the canteen and orders an omelet before joining the writers at a table where they have already begun their regular Sunday meeting.

"What kind of shape are we in for next week's show?" asks Jim.

"Next week's show?" says Jerry Juhl. "We're still working on this week's show!"

Normally only minor changes are made to the script after the read-through, but this week—because a last-minute decision to include another musical number has been made—major surgery will be required, so they proceed to discuss the possibilities. Nearby, a group of Muppet personnel—Richard Hunt, Louise Gold, Kathy Mullen, Bobby Payne and Polly Smith—are aghast at the dessert that Derek Scott has brought to their table.

"It's cherry cobbler with custard," Derek explains.

"In America you need a prescription to get stuff like that," says Richard.

At 2:00 the performers return to the rehearsal room.

"Let's try 'I'm So Happy,' " says Ray Charles, looking over some sheet music open on the piano.

"All right," says Jim. "This is sung by three miserable, depressed wretches."

"Two miserable, depressed wretches," corrects Derek Scott.

"That's right," says Jim. "The third one died and now they're even more depressed."

"Okay," says Ray. " 'I'm So Happy' sung by two miserable, depressed wretches. Let's try it from the top."

Above: In Rehearsal Room 7/8, top, Linda Ronstadt discusses a vocal arrangement with Derek Scott, seated, Ray Charles, in check suit, and Jim Henson. Later David Lazer takes the guest star to inspect her costume for her "Blue Bayou" number.

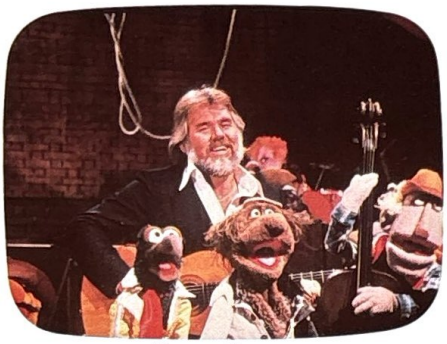
Season

Star Wars

John Denver

Beverly Sills

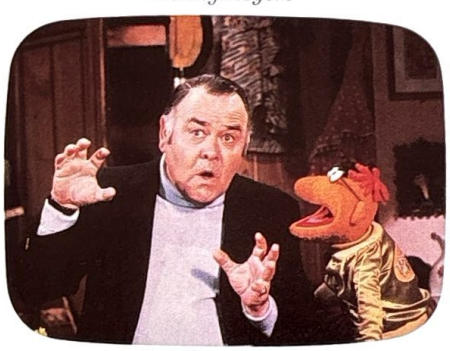
Dizzy Gillespie



Kenny Rogers

Linda Carter

Alan Arkin



Jonathan Winters

Lola Falana

Crystal Gayle

Shields & Yarnell

Victor Borge

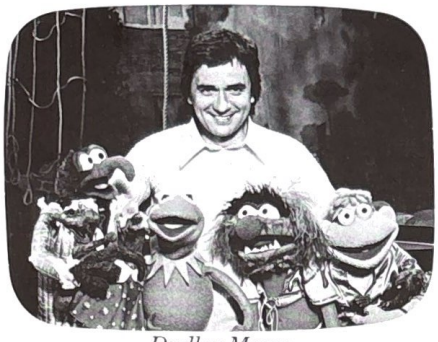
IV

Christopher Reeve

Liza Minnelli

Diana Ross

Doug Henning



Dudley Moore

Anne Murray

Phyllis George

Carol Channing

Andy Williams

Linda Lavin

Dyan Cannon

Arlo Guthrie

2. Band Call

The band stage—actually a recording studio—at ATV's Elstree plant is a high-ceilinged room, approximately sixty feet long and forty feet wide. Its walls are lined with acoustic tiles and sound reflectors. Dozens of microphones of various types dot the floor, which is actually on two different levels. At either end of the room is a low platform, each of which extends roughly twenty feet. On one of these is a recording booth, a soundproof structure about the size of a small trailer home, with windows overlooking the stage. On the other platform is a series of glass-topped partitions clustered behind which are music stands and folding chairs. More folding chairs clutter the trough between the two platforms, where a grand piano sits near a small podium. Off to the side are a couple of upright pianos

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(one, employed in the recording of Rowlf's musical efforts, kept deliberately out of tune), an electric piano and a harpsichord. Not far away, on one of the platforms, a drum kit is being set up near a set of vibes and a marimba. Elsewhere are other instruments: a harp (under a fabric cover), a huge Chinese gong and a set of chimes.

At a little before 10:30 this Monday morning the musicians who make up the *Muppet Show* orchestra begin to arrive. Surprisingly, given the richness of some of the orchestrations used on the show, there are only ten of them, all of them veteran British studio musicians, some with experience going back to the Ted Heath band of the fifties. All are extremely versatile, and several double on a number of instruments—essential talents since they may be called upon to play any kind of music, from opera to jazz.

Near the grand piano Jack Parnell—who conducts the orchestra—is chatting with Ray Charles and Derek Scott. Jim Henson arrives from a design meeting and, after exchanging a few words with Joan Chaplow, the production assistant on this week's show, he joins the group at the piano. While sound men adjust microphones and music is handed out to members of the orchestra, David Lazer enters with Linda Ronstadt and Peter Asher.

The purpose of these Monday-morning sessions is to lay down the instrumental tracks for the week's show. The majority of guests prefer to perform live at the taping—that is certainly the case with Linda Ronstadt—but the star's presence is still required since he or she must be on hand to approve arrangements and orchestral balance, to set tempos and so forth. Also, despite the fact that she will perform live on set, Linda Ronstadt's voice will be recorded anyway—on a separate track—so it can be used as a guide for the Muppet performers when she is not present (at preliminary rehearsals, for instance).

One of the songs to be worked on this morning is the venerable "When I Grow Too Old to Dream," which the guest will sing as a duet with Jim as Kermit. The pair of them rehearse for a while, with Derek providing the accompaniment and Ray standing by, making occasional suggestions. It is evident from the outset that Linda Ronstadt is very professional and is able to reproduce her recorded performances with ease.

Chris Langham, who is rewriting some scenes for this week's show, arrives on the band stage and sits down with the guest for a few minutes to look over some dialogue. Then the guest is ready to run through the song with the full instrumental backing. Only piano, vibes, bass and drums are involved, but the other musicians remain in their seats and listen to the performance. At its conclusion they applaud. Jack Parnell descends from the podium where he has been conducting and speaks to Jim.

"It's a good bit, that," he says. "A very nice bit."

After another run-through—this time they try it with just piano and vibes—Jim and the guest are ready to enter the recording booth. Donning earphones, they wait for their cue from the second engineer up in the control booth.

Four numbers are rehearsed and recorded this way during the course of a three-hour session. Toward 1:30 Jim and the guest star head up to the control booth to listen to playbacks. The band stage slowly empties. Jack Parnell offers one of the musicians a ride back to the city. Two of the reed players discuss a new tenor mouthpiece that one of them has had sent to him from New York. By 1:50 the band stage is deserted except for a pair of technicians and a piano tuner who stands at one of the uprights playing octaves and fifths.

"Just making sure nobody pinched any of the black notes," he remarks.

3. Pre-Record

Monday is usually a relatively light workday for the majority of the Muppet performers. Most weeks they do not have a call until 2:30 in the afternoon, at which time they report to the band stage to record voice tracks for the show that will begin taping the following morning. On this particular afternoon a technical problem is delaying the start of the recording session, so people are amusing themselves as best they can. Dave Goelz, Kathy Mullen and Steve Whitmire are thumbing through American magazines that someone has brought in. Louise Gold embarks on an impression of Barbra Streisand for the benefit of a duo of sound technicians who are setting up microphones.

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Richard Hunt and Jerry Nelson pre-record voice tracks for a number to be performed by the Electric Mayhem.

Derek Scott is chewing a bacon sandwich and Richard Hunt is reading yesterday's *News of the World*.

"Hey, is Frank Oz here?" he asks. "There's a story in here about a vicar and a pig that he really ought to read."

"What happened to Kermit?" asks Louise. "He was here five minutes ago. What the hell happened to him?"

At that moment Jim Henson and Ray Charles enter with a box full of kazoos. Not wishing to waste time because of the technical delay, it has occurred to Jim that this would be a good opportunity to try out some kazoo numbers. (One such number is planned for an upcoming show.) Kazoos are handed out and everyone gathers around a piano to improvise harmonies for such chestnuts as "Ragtime Cowboy Joe" and "Sweet Adeline." After about half an hour of this the performers are informed that the hitch in the control booth has been ironed out and they can begin recording just as soon as they are ready.

"Let's start with Richard's number," Jim suggests. "That shouldn't take too long."

"Good old 'One Take' Hunt," says Richard. "You can always rely on him."

As things work out, this number takes much longer than anticipated. The script calls for Richard to perform the part of a wishy-washy character who sings the Bachrach-David ballad "Close to You."

"I'm a wimp," says Richard, trying to get himself into the right frame of mind.

"From the top," says Derek Scott.

Richard listens to the piano intro and begins to sing. "Why do birds suddenly appear, every time you are near . . ."

The notion presented by the writers is that, unnoticed by the singer, birds *will* suddenly appear, stars *will* tumble from the sky, every boy in town *will* follow the vocalist's girlfriend around. Richard runs through the song once, in a quavering, apologetic kind of voice, and Ray Charles corrects his phrasing. Richard tries again, then turns to Jim.

"You know," he says, "I'd like to do this a completely different way. I can't buy the idea of this timid little guy not noticing all the stuff that's going on around him. I mean, this guy's *very* nervous. He would jump out of his skin if a leaf fell behind him, yet we've got him ignoring the fact that stars are falling around his girl's head. That doesn't make sense."

Jim listens thoughtfully. "What do you have in mind?"

"Well," says Richard, "I see this as being sung by a real pompous guy, real conceited. He cares more about the fact that he has a trained voice than he does about his girl. He's so full of himself that he doesn't notice what's happening to her."

"An operatic voice?" asks Jim.

"Not exactly."

"Sort of an Alfred Drake voice?" asks Ray Charles.

"More that kind of thing," says Richard. "Someone who thinks he's Howard Keel."

He tries a few bars of the song, then interrupts himself.

"That's not quite it. Let's start again. Pom, pom, *pom*—like that."

This time he sings the entire song in a voice that is bombastic and heavy with self-importance.

"I think I like that," says Jim. "Let's go with that."

Next comes a Beach Boys song with elaborate five-part harmonies. Given that most of the Muppet performers are unable to read music, learning these parts has not been easy, but Ray Charles—whose first love is vocal music—has spent three days coaching the singers until they are performing the piece almost perfectly. ("But not *quite* perfectly," says Ray. "That would be inappropriate for *The Muppet Show*.") The results justify his patience.

This particular recording session lasts for almost four hours, during which time the voice tracks for three production numbers are laid down.

Musical consultant Ray Charles, a key figure at pre-record sessions.

4. "Blue Bayou"

Puppet shows on television have generally been characterized by a minimal expenditure on sets and production values. Where *The Muppet Show* is concerned, though, the opposite is the case. If an elaborate set is needed, it is built no matter what the cost; and the cost of the set itself is just the beginning. Elaborate sets almost invariably call for elaborate staging—it would be difficult to justify the need for that kind of set, otherwise—and elaborate staging is inevitably a time-consuming process. On this Tuesday morning the crew on the floor of Studio D is preparing to shoot "Blue Bayou," the most complex of the production numbers planned for the show which stars Linda Ronstadt. (It is conventional to shoot the most difficult number first, at the very beginning of the tape schedule.)

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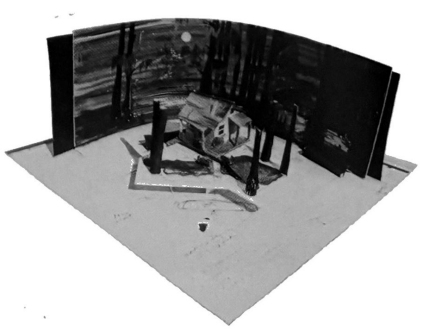
By the time the performers report to the studio at 9:30, the set has already been installed and partially lit. Built on two dozen platforms and covering an area of roughly 1,200 square feet, it represents a tumbledown shack in a southern swamp: this might be some forgotten corner of Mississippi or Louisiana. The set incorporates three pools filled to a depth of several inches with water (they are lined with plastic material and sandbags) on which float leaves and real lily pads. The largest of the pools also accommodates a flat-bottomed rowboat furnished with oars and fishing rods. Elsewhere there are broad expanses of real turf, from which sprout real ferns, reeds and swamp grasses. Half a dozen cypress trees rise from this man-made bog. Their naturalistic trunks are made of plastic foam supported by wooden armatures. Real lichens nestle in their gnarled roots. The overhanging branches are real too, but the Spanish moss that clings to them is synthetic.

The shack looks as if it has been there forever. The roof sags and the woodwork is weathered. The porch, which extends from one side of the building to become a dock (where the rowboat is moored), is rickety and seems to be sinking slowly into the swamp. A light glows behind one window and candles flicker in glass-and-metal

Above: Designer Leigh Malone, standing, surveys the "Blue Bayou" set. Louise Gold, suffering the puppeteers' lot, rests beneath the porch of the shack.
Below: A model for the "Blue Bayou" set.



housings hung from the outside walls. On the porch are more fishing rods, a rocking chair and—a little incongruously—a miniature marimba and Animal's drum set. Behind the set is a huge backcloth, perhaps sixty feet long and twenty feet high, which depicts a full moon shining through more cypress trees. Stars glimmer among the painted branches and, to complete the illusion of evening in the bayou country, fireflies—actually flashlight bulbs on springy rods—dance in the shrubs beside the shack. The detail is exquisite and the overall effect most convincing.

At a little after 10:00 Leigh Malone—the designer of this week's show—is on the set making sure that it is correctly "dressed." (The designer spends much of his or her time in the control booth, checking the look of the show on the monitors there. An assistant is assigned to the floor for set-dressing purposes, but the complexity of this set calls for the on-floor presence of the designer herself.) There are many minor adjustments to be made. As lighting director Phil Hawkes asks for a spotlight to be turned onto the moon, a prop man drips metholated spirits onto a block of compressed charcoal under the shingles of the shack's roof, and smoke begins to drift upward through a rustic-looking galvanized-pipe chimney, curling toward the banks of lights overhead. Jim Henson studies the appearance of the set on a color monitor and confers with Richard Holloway and director Philip Casson.

The designer cannot proceed further with dressing the set until the performers are in place, with their puppets. At 10:35 they are called to the floor. Jim Henson, Dave Goelz and Bobby Payne, all of whom are operating frogs, take up positions in a kind of trench—actually a gap, about two feet wide, between platforms—which cuts diagonally across the set and will be invisible to the cameras. Animal, Floyd Pepper, Janice and a marimba player are all to be stationed on the porch. Richard Hunt will be operating Janice through a small hole cut in a wall of the shack. Frank Oz (Animal), Jerry Nelson (Floyd) and Steve Whitmire (marimba player) take up their positions in a crawl space under the porch. Joining them there are Kathy Mullen and Louise Gold, operating more frogs. Two further frogs are the responsibility of Karen Prell, stationed in front of Jerry Nelson.

Once the performers have adjusted their hidden monitors and made themselves reasonably comfortable, the designer can proceed with her job. Props and plants are moved to ensure that puppeteers will be completely hidden. Phil Hawkes, now that he can see the puppets *in situ*, sends electricians aloft to make subtle modifications to the lighting. Another forty minutes pass in this way and a tea break is called.

Most of the Muppet performers take their break in the shop or the lounge area, chatting and reading newspapers. Tea and coffee are brought around on a tray. Jim looks over some papers that his secretary, Patsy de Lord, has brought down from the office, then goes into an impromptu script conference with Jerry Juhl.

Thirty minutes after the break was called, everyone is back in position on the floor. Elaborate camera movements will be required for this number and it is time to begin blocking them out. Camera 3 will remain relatively static, covering the set from near the center of the floor. Camera 1, mounted on the crane, and Camera 2 must track with the star, who will be walking slowly along the front of the set, covering a distance of about sixty feet before returning to her starting place. Cameras 1 and 2 must roll through a broad arc, moving first to their right and then back to their left. During the course of this maneuver the two men operating Camera 1 have the additional responsibility of precisely timing a rise and fall of six or seven feet as they track and, at the same time, must avoid colliding with Camera 3 as it pulls back from the set.

Between takes, production secretary, Patsy de Lord, Jerry Nelson and Jim Henson read fan mail.

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All this must be choreographed to the movements of the star and the various puppets, which are in turn determined by the music. The sound engineer in the booth plays the music and voice tracks over speakers on the studio floor so the Muppet performers can have their puppets lip-synch or play their instruments while Richard Holloway walks through the star's part for the benefit of the cameras.

As the camera movements are rehearsed, Leigh Malone is called on again to make more adjustments to the set. A clump of vegetation is obscuring Floyd and Janice as seen from Camera 3. Richard requests a more solid support under the turf at one corner of the set, where the star will be standing for a few seconds. Now that the singer's movements are being physically blocked out, Phil Hawkes takes the opportunity to trim his lights yet again.

This process continues till about 12:45, when the star arrives on the floor for a costume check and to familiarize herself with the set. For this number she is wearing a knee-length Victorian camisole with white blossoms in her hair. She chats for a while with Jim, and they are joined by David Lazer, who has come down to make sure that the guest is comfortable with the pace of the proceedings. She does one informal walk-through; then, at 1:00 precisely, everybody breaks for lunch.

At 2:15 the crew is back on the floor. A pair of Muppet builders are napping in the performers' lounge, and in the shop Linda Ronstadt's father and a group of friends are posing for photographs. Philip Casson has decided that the camera movements should be changed to end on more of a wide shot, and so, beginning at 2:23, a whole new choreography is worked out, with Richard Holloway still standing in for the star. Between walk-throughs the puppeteers pass the time as best they can. Richard Hunt, relatively comfortable on his stool behind the shack wall, reads the *Herald Tribune*. The people under the shack can only sit and wait, in semi-darkness, but those in the trench are able to stand up and move about to some extent. Dave Goelz, in the trench, is receiving a haircut. Jim commutes between the trench and the front of the set, where he confers with Richard Holloway or pauses to check something on a monitor. Occasionally he makes expeditions to the back of the set to consult with Frank Oz, or to give instructions to other puppeteers. Patsy de Lord appears again with another sheaf of papers, and Jim looks through them with a frog (not Kermit) still in place on his arm. The camera moves are rehearsed again and again—the crossover between Camera 1 and Camera 3 is particularly tricky—and the new angles that result from their revised maneuvers make for further alterations in the dressing of the set. Finally, toward 3:30, everything is ready and Linda Ronstadt is called to the floor. With her in position Phil Hawkes makes last-minute adjustments.

"Do you happen to have another black gobo? And can I possibly have a blue gel over here, please?"

It has been determined that the guest will use a hand mike—she cannot produce the proper breathy intonation with a mike on a boom—so a soundman conceals the microphone's cable in the turf along the front of the set. As the singer walks toward him, he will have to pull the cable in slowly, then let it out carefully as she returns to her starting position. The cable will have to be hidden in the grass after every rehearsal and every take.

Run-throughs with the star begin at 3:38. The sound engineer plays the instrumental tracks, but after a few seconds Peter Asher, who is standing nearby, asks Richard Holloway, "Can we have less echo?" The problem is corrected and the run-through proceeds with Richard coaching from the floor.

Above: A general view of the "Blue Bayou" set (with Muppets in place). Opposite: Guest star Linda Ronstadt consults with Jim Henson, up to his waist in make-believe swamp.

"Now, Linda dear, here's your mark. You pause right here while the marimba player takes his solo. Then, if you could look over toward Camera 2, that will pick up your close-up. . . . Now, on 'saving nickles, saving dimes,' you turn and head back. . . . That's lovely. . . . Watch the cable, dear. . . . And you stop . . . just . . . here. . . . Lovely . . . Now turn to Camera 1. . . . That's perfect. . . . And smile. . . . Applause, applause, much applause . . . We'll be dubbing in the applause here, so hold the smile. . . . Thank you, that's great."

Despite the fact that it is getting very hot under the lights, the star is relaxed and appears to be enjoying herself. A wardrobe woman adjusts her costume and a makeup girl touches up her face. The guest jokes with the floor manager, then fluffs her hair, using a monitor as a mirror. Another rehearsal begins. Three still photographers are clicking away, their task complicated by the fact that they must dodge between the tracking video-camera rigs.

At 4:11 Jim calls for a take.

"All right," Richard Holloway calls out. "Is everybody ready? Is Animal ready?"

Animal pops up behind his drum set.

"Rea-dy, Rich-ard."

"Thank you, Frank. Very quiet, gentlemen. We're rolling. . . . In five . . . Absolute quiet . . ."

As has been evident from band call and rehearsals, Linda Ronstadt can turn in an immaculate performance nine times out of ten. On this first take, however—perhaps because she is concentrating too hard on her marks—she slips up and quips, "Oops—I feel so bad I'm in another key."

The microphone cable is hidden in the turf once more and they go for another take. The puppet frogs take up their chorus of "Rib-it, rib-it," Floyd strums his guitar and Steve Whitmire's marimba player holds his mallets at the ready. The take goes without mishap, but nobody is quite happy with it. Everyone watches the playback, which only confirms their misgivings.

"I was moving very mechanically," says the star. "I'm still looking for my marks."

Jim thinks that the frogs need to be more animated and decides to move Kathy Mullen a few inches so her frogs will be more visible. The performers are ready for another take, but there is a minor malfunction in the sound system, so a fifteen-minute break is called. At 4:50 everyone is in place and ready for a third take. This one goes well enough, but after watching the playback Jim decides it was a little listless. At 4:59 they try again. This take is abruptly ruined by a whine of feedback from the mike. The tape continues to roll and Richard Holloway gives the start signal once more, but this take too is quickly aborted when he notices that a prop man, who is operating the fireflies, is visible on camera. With hardly a pause they attempt another take and this one goes well until the star stumbles over a line and calls a halt. Jim calls for a playback and, after conferring with Philip Casson in the booth, decides that everything was just about perfect up to the point where the cameras cut to the band on the porch. Instead of starting from the beginning again, they can pick up the action from the cutaway.

There is a break in the action. The guest asks Jim if it isn't tiring working with your hands over your head all day. "You get used to it," says Jim.

At 5:08 they attempt to pick up the action from the cutaway. The guest has been given misleading instructions and moves off in the wrong direction. They try again and this time she looks at the wrong camera. A third take goes well until, at the very end, she trips on a piece of loose turf.

Linda Ronstadt performing "Blue Bayou."

An overhead shot giving some idea of the scale of the "Blue Bayou" set. Clearly visible from this angle are the pools and the "trench" in which the Muppet performers are concealed from the camera.

At 5:20 a clapper board appears on monitors around the studio: "Muppet Show #119. Scene 6A. Take 4."

Richard Holloway holds up his hands. "In five seconds . . . Absolute quiet, please . . ."

Richard Hunt puts down his paper. Jim Henson adjusts his monitor. Dave Goelz ducks out of sight. Marimba music comes from the loudspeakers and Linda Ronstadt looks to Richard Holloway for her cue.

The take goes perfectly. At its conclusion the star smiles at the red light on Camera 1.

"Applause," says the floor manager, "applause, applause, applause, applause . . ."

In a fraction less than eight hours a little more than two minutes of action has been captured on tape.

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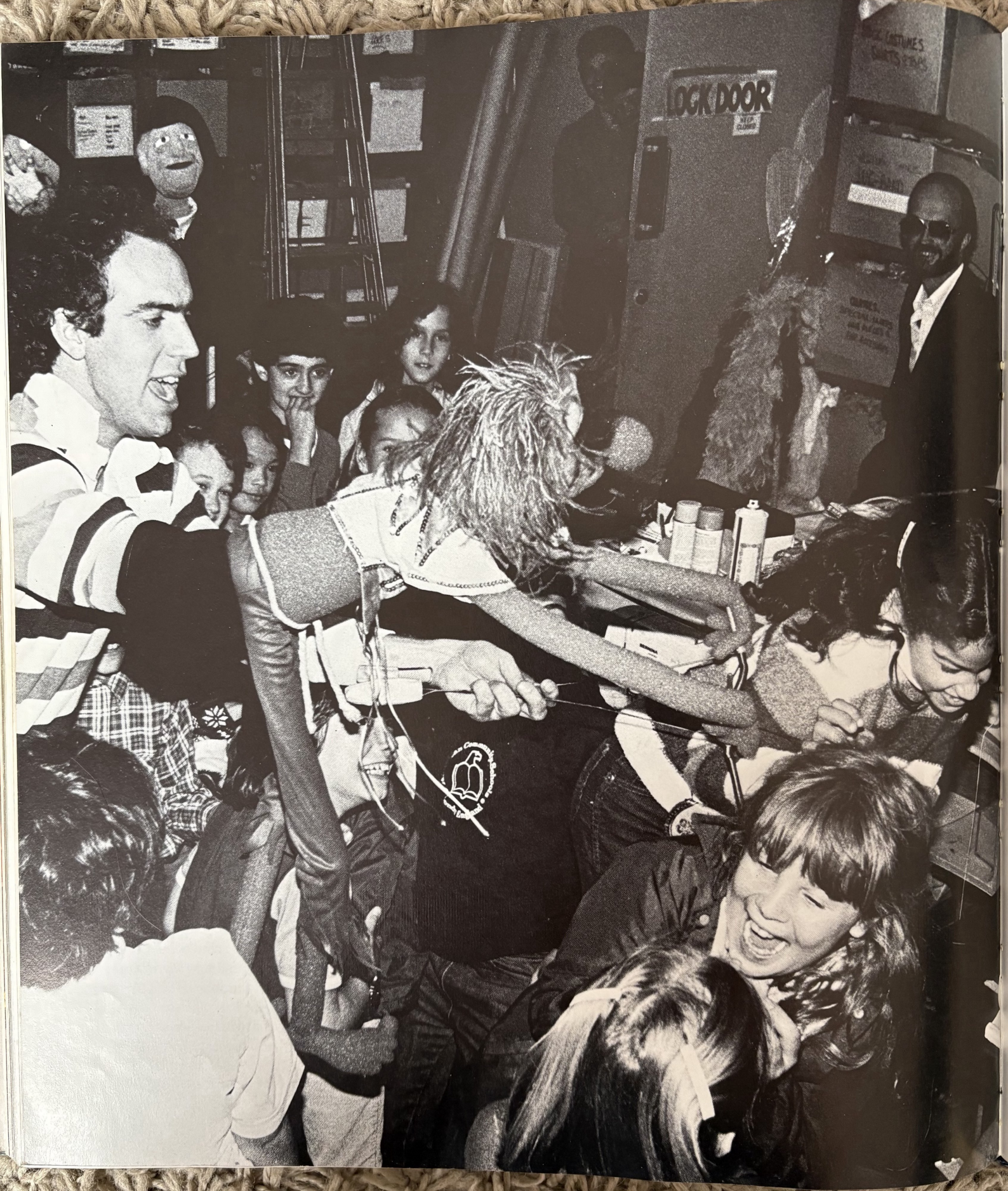
LOCK DOOR

5. Waiting

During the course of a season, every puppeteer and member of the workshop staff spends hundreds of hours in the performers' lounge (a name which is given to it here quite gratuitously because it has no formal designation). This is the locus for catnaps, casual rehearsals, reading, clowning and conversation, informal music-making and generally passing the time during the long periods of inactivity that are the norm in any television studio. On taping days each performer is on call from 9:30 in the morning till 7:30 in the evening, and sometimes later, but a given puppeteer may not be needed on the floor for hours at a stretch. The performers' lounge is small and cluttered, containing two battered sofas, a table piled with personal belongings and a couple of chairs.

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A black-and-white monitor sits on a huge speaker in one corner and the floor is littered with shoulder bags, ash trays and telephones. The walls are decorated with cartoons, a dart board, a map of the world, a Scooter doll, a black kite, photo-montages of figures with animal heads, a label for "Waldorf Apples," a kid's fan letter and other assorted bric-a-brac.

A scene has been completed and a new set is being dressed and lit. Richard Holloway can be seen on the monitor, directing the movement of props. In the lounge Jerry Nelson is playing guitar and singing a song called "Hobo Lullaby," accompanied by Steve Whitmire on the banjo. Nancy Moran, in London to photograph the Muppets for an American magazine, is loading her cameras and chatting with Richard Hunt. David Dagley, another still photographer, takes the guitar from Jerry to show him the chord changes for a song Steve has suggested. Louise Gold, stretched out on a sofa with her eyes closed, complains that there's too much bloody noise. Dave Goelz is trying to memorize lines for his next scene and Kathy Mullen is talking to somebody on the telephone.

Frank Oz comes through the door with Miss Piggy on his arm and a visiting journalist close behind him.

"Excuse me," he apologizes, "but Piggy has to give an interview."

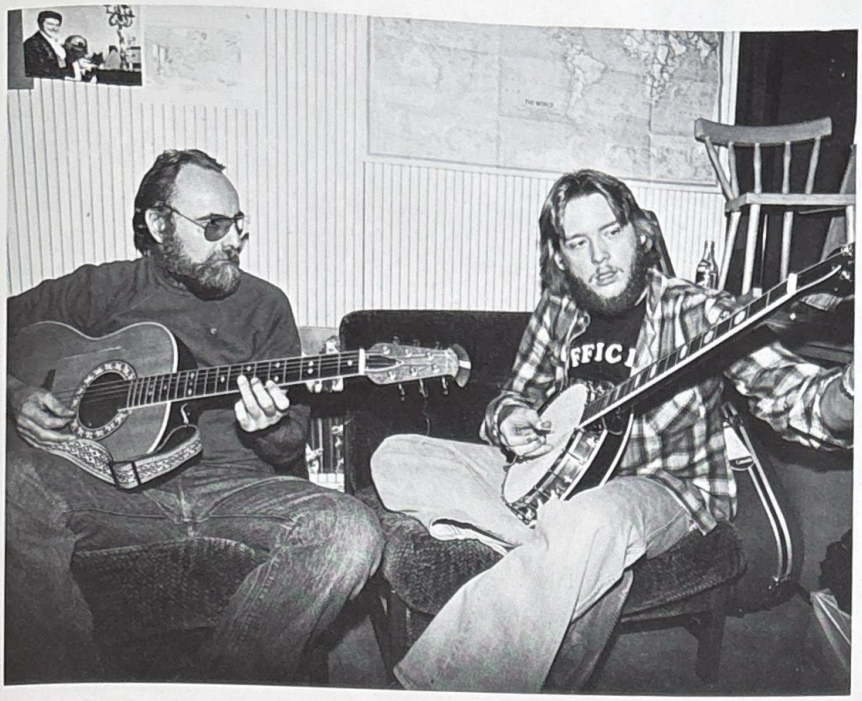
Jerry and Steve head for the canteen, inviting Richard to accompany them. He declines, however, because he is waiting to show a group of children around the workshop. Naturally enough, *The Muppet Show* is a magnet for kids. On taping days children dot the bank of theater seats overlooking Studio D, and, inevitably, some of them find their way down into the Muppet workshop. The shop has a strange effect on kids. Children who have been diagnosed by worried parents as verging on the hyperactive are miraculously transformed into catatonic beings devoid of speech. To come suddenly face to face with Kermit, Miss Piggy or Fozzie Bear is an overwhelming experience.

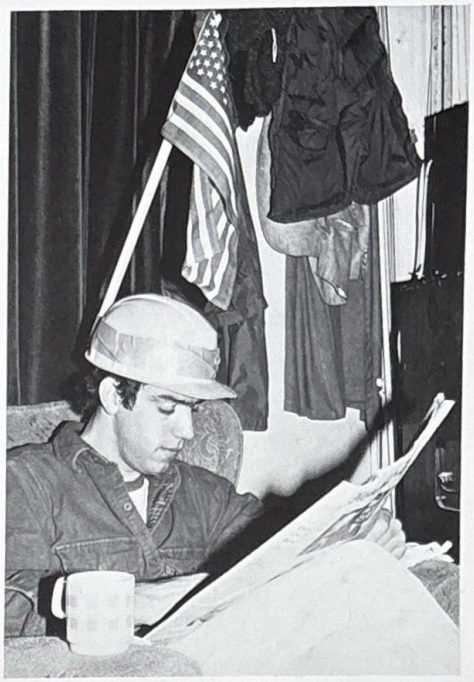
One or another of the Muppet performers will generally oblige by hoisting a puppet onto one arm and having it engage in a conversation with the young visitors for the benefit of a parent's camera. Louise can often be found operating Annie Sue or Animal while the flashbulbs pop. The acknowledged master of these informal entertainments, however, is Richard Hunt. Few taping days pass without him putting on three or four impromptu shows in front of the wooden rack where most of the show's principal characters are stored.

Generally, so that work will not be disrupted, only small groups are permitted in the shop, but today an exception has been made for a large party of American schoolchildren. Eight-, nine- and ten-year-olds, accompanied by two adults, they have spent the morning watching proceedings from the theater seats. Richard has already visited them there and has managed to memorize most of their names. Now, as they edge into the shop, he waves them over and, putting Kermit on his right arm, goes into his performance.

"I know what you've been hearing about me and Miss Piggy," Kermit begins, "but I'm here to tell you it is absolutely and positively not true. There is nothing between me and Miss Piggy! Okay? Don't believe everything you read in the newspapers."

It is Richard's special gift that he can work with other people's puppets, can summon them to life. His Kermit voice is a close approximation of Jim's, and the kids' belief in Kermit is total. They seem to forget that Richard is there. After a couple of minutes he puts Kermit down and asks whom they would like to meet next. There is a





chorus of "Piggy! Piggy!" but he explains that she is giving an interview. Without waiting for further suggestions, Richard picks up one of his own characters, Janice, and has her pivot her head from side to side so that she appears to be sizing up the group.

"Wow, too much!" says Janice in her best Haight-Ashbury accents. "Any of you guys from California?"

One small girl raises her hand.

"Well, fer *sure*," says Janice. "It's Danielle, right? You look *real* laid back, Danielle."

Danielle is giggling and the other kids are watching intently.

"I'll bet you're a surfer," Janice continues. "Far out!"

Janice is replaced by Rowlf.

"Do you really play the piano?" a child asks.

"Well, my Bach is worse than my bite!" says Rowlf, drawing loud jeers from workshop personnel in the vicinity. As Rowlf guffaws, the phone rings and Richard has Rowlf pick up the receiver and place it to his ear.

"Hello," says Rowlf. "ATV studios, home of the world-famous *Muppet Show*. Rowlf the Dog speaking."

"This one . . . This one . . . " Fingers point at half a dozen different characters. Richard selects Crazy Harry, who explains his philosophy of life. "I like to blow things up, yuk, yuk."

Harry is succeeded by Animal, who flexes his muscular brow and pants lasciviously as he surveys the group. "An-i-mal like wo-man," he growls before suddenly lunging for one of the adults, sending the kids scattering and shrieking.

After Animal comes Beaker.

"I love this guy," says Richard thoughtfully. "When this series is over, he's the one puppet I want to take home with me."

Above: Richard Hunt in the performers' lounge taking no chances.
Left: Although each Muppet performer is on call from 9:30 till 7:30, there are often long periods of inactivity during which time the puppeteers must amuse themselves as best they can. Here, between takes, Jerry Nelson and Steve Whitmire pick out a song called "Hobo Lullaby."
Below: Jim Henson's sketch for Beaker.

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MUPPET
VARIETY
ACTS
FRANK

6. Routine

By Wednesday evening all scenes involving the guest star have been shot. The following day, with no guest on hand, there are fewer visitors to the studio and the still photographers are conspicuous by their absence. On a typical Thursday morning we find the performers on the studio floor early, rehearsing on the backstage set, which is a permanent installation and needs little special preparation. In the scene to be shot Gonzo explains to Kermit that he is giving up his death-defying stunts in favor of a career as a singer. Meanwhile, characters in costume from the previous production number mill about, and one of them—a stilt-walker—experiences a good deal of difficulty in maintaining his balance.

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First, with the assistance of Steve Whitmire, the stilt-walker is to fall from the upper level of the set. Subsequently, in the hands of Frank Oz, he will stagger and careen about the lower level before falling once more.

Soon after 10:00 everyone is ready to go for the first take of the day. While Kermit and Gonzo discuss the latter's proposed singing career, Kathy Mullen, at the top of the stairs, marches the stilt-walker over to Steve. He takes over and causes the stilt-walker to lose his balance and topple over, to fall with a crash at Frank's feet. As the stilt-walker lands, Kermit and Gonzo—hardly missing a beat—glance in his direction. As they do so, Frank calls a halt to the take.

"Stevie," he yells up, "you're throwing him. Just let him drop, otherwise I can't get to him in time."

Frank takes hold of the stilts, heaves the stilt-walker over his head and begins to pull the stilts this way and that so that the puppet lurches helplessly, looking so much like a man totally out of control that everyone is in fits of laughter.

"Frank, are you ready to try again?" asks Richard Holloway.

"Just experimenting," says Frank, grinning at his monitor.

A couple of minutes later the stilt-walker is passed up to Kathy and, shortly, another take is under way. Frank aborts it at the same point as before.

"You're still throwing him, Stevie."

"I just pushed him over."

"He's flying too far."

Two minutes later another take is under way. This time the stilt-walker topples gently enough, but part of his costume becomes snagged on a prop and he hangs there, far out of Frank's reach. During the next take the stilt-walker bounces off a prop and falls in just the right place, but Frank cannot control him in time. Finally, with the tape still rolling, the stilt-walker's fall from the upper level is accomplished perfectly. Frank actually manages to catch hold of the stilts before they hit the ground, heaves the puppet up above his head (on the monitor the character seems to be righting himself with the greatest of difficulty) and begins to twist the stilts this way and that. Frank himself is shifting his balance awkwardly, stretching and swaying, and his moves are magically transmitted to the stilt-walker, who begins to totter, struggles to regain his equilibrium, succeeds for a second or two, then begins to keel over again. As Frank works, he grimaces and utters little grunts. On the monitor these noises appear to come from the puppet, which wears an expression of combined bewilderment and terror. Kermit makes his exit and Jim straightens up, turning as he does so to watch what is happening on the large color monitor. Frank is still crossing and uncrossing the stilts, jerking them more and more frantically, then allowing the puppet to recover its balance once more. At precisely that moment Dave Goelz turns Gonzo's head so that the Great One is looking directly at the stilt-walker. Then Dave begins to move Gonzo off camera.

As he exits, Gonzo is supposed to pat the nearest stilt approvingly (but too hard) and remark, "Hey, that was great." Gonzo pats the stilt on cue, but Dave forgets his line, substituting a heart-felt "Rats!" With the take blown, everyone laughs, but Frank—not one to waste a chance to rehearse—precipitates the stilt-walker into his final, vertiginous fall.

Forty-five minutes later, after a series of miscues and misreadings, the scene is wrapped up. Relaxing in the performers' lounge, Dave remarks that these backstage bits always seem to take longer than anyone anticipates. "There's always something

On a set representing "Scarborough Fair" built for the show starring Paul Simon, Jerry Nelson manipulates a pair of acrobats and Frank Oz takes charge of an accident-prone stilt walker.

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Nurse Piggy demonstrates that devotion to the well-being of others is not inconsistent with a high degree of chic and glamour.

Above: Typical scenes from "Veterinarian's Hospital," with Nurse Piggy, Dr. Bob (alias Rowlf the Dog), Nurse Janice and plenty of opportunities for every bad joke ever written.
Below: Richard Hunt watches the monitor as Nurse Janice feeds Dr. Bob with the lead-in to one of his excruciating puns.

tricky about them. You're working in a confined space, so it's usually a problem to get things organized just right. They're never quite as routine as you expect them to be."

Louise Gold is sitting nearby, talking on the phone, uncharacteristically serious, trying to make herself understood and becoming rather frustrated. "But I already explained," she says, "the woman I spoke to on Monday said they would be ready today, and I need them."

Peter Harris, who is dubbing sound for a show taped several weeks earlier, pops his head through the door and says, "Lou, are you available? I need you for a scream."

"A *scream?*" Louise shrieks into the phone. "I'm *dying* to scream!"

After the break there is another backstage set-up to be shot. This involves Kermit and Gonzo once more, along with assorted other characters including the stilt-walker (sporting a fine crop of bandages) and a batch of talking asparagus spears which, improbably (if this were not *The Muppet Show),* are scheduled to hatch from green speckled eggs about the size of alligator eggs. This is a scene that requires the participation of all the puppeteers except Frank Oz. The stilt-walker is now the exclusive responsibility of Steve Whitmire.

This turns out to be another of those tricky backstage scenes. The eggs have been constructed so as to crack open when the asparagus spears are pushed up against their shells, but they do not always crack open in the most photogenic way. After each take Bobby Payne, who is doubling as one of the spear-carriers, has to get up on a box and carefully restore the eggs so that their pre-cut cracks are not visible. Meanwhile, the choreography of the ensemble moving through the set proves tricky because of the confined space. Also, Dave Goelz is not happy with his reading of Gonzo's lines and this too delays the proceedings.

"Hey, that was good," says Jerry Nelson hopefully after each botched take. When a faultless take is finally achieved, he assumes a crestfallen look and shakes his head. "That was terrible. Let's do it again."

There is no time to start work on another scene before lunch, but the "Veterinarian's Hospital" set is ready when the performers return to the studio floor at 2:15. By 2:30 Richard Hunt has Janice, in her nurse's uniform, up on set. Jim, assisted by Louise, is ready with Rowlf in his Dr. Bob costume, and Dave Goelz is on hand with Gonzo, who is to be the patient in this sketch. Jerry Nelson is standing by to play the part of the unseen announcer. The only thing that is delaying taping is the fact that repairs are being made to Nurse Piggy's uniform. Rather than hold things up any longer, Frank Oz suggests that they rehearse the scene with a half-scale pig, built for another sketch, serving as Nurse Piggy's stand-in. This proves to be a disastrous notion. As the first rehearsal gets under way, Frank cannot resist the temptation of having the midget pig

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talk in the voice of a precocious five-year-old, like a child impersonating Miss Piggy. He is doing an imitation of bad puppetry and this reduces the other performers to hysterical laughter. Suddenly we are in a situation where everyone has forgotten about the demands of weekly television. The performers are being swept away by a tide of sheer silliness, the sublime silliness that is always near the surface on *The Muppet Show.* The crew is caught up in it too and Richard Holloway cannot stop laughing. Having seen what is happening on the monitor in the lounge, Steve Whitmire comes out onto the floor to watch.

The repairs to Nurse Piggy's uniform have been made and she replaces the half-scale pig on Frank's right arm. "Who was that little runt anyway?" Piggy demands indignantly. The line between studio reality and Muppet reality has become hopelessly blurred. Everyone is ad-libbing in character. Jim suggests that they might as well try for a take right away, hoping perhaps that the silliness can be caught on tape. Midway through the take Dave Goelz forgets a line. Gonzo looks at the camera and says, "Ah, phooey!" Jerry chimes in, using his announcer's voice, "And so we come to the end of another 'Veterinarian's Hospital.' Tune in next week, when you'll hear Dave Goelz say, 'What am I supposed to say now?' " Everyone is laughing again and Frank attempts to restore order by saying, very seriously, "I don't think the reincarnation joke is funny." Given the prevailing mood, this comes out sounding like a deliberate and brilliant piece of self-parody, which sets everyone off again.

"Ah, well," says Piggy, *"c'est la guerre!"*

"Let's go for another one," says Dr. Bob.

"We're still rolling," says Richard Holloway. "In five. Very quiet, please."

Frank, who has worked Piggy into a huff, promptly misses his cue.

"Hold it," Jim calls out.

"What happened?" asks Frank.

"You blew your cue," says Richard Hunt.

"No, I didn't," says Frank, affronted.

"Yes, you did," sings everyone in chorus.

Frank continues to protest his innocence, which only elicits a barrage of jeers. Under normal circumstances he would have been the first to catch his mistake, and his co-workers seize on this rare opportunity to needle him. Frank extricates himself from the situation by slipping back into character as Nurse Piggy.

"Are you presuming to insinuate that *moi* missed my cue? Hiiiiiii . . . "

With which Piggy winds up for a karate chop aimed at Dr. Bob's head. This does little to restore sanity.

"I'm sorry, Phil," says Richard Holloway, addressing Philip Casson up in the booth. "They're all out of control down here."

Frank brings Piggy nose to nose with Richard. "Ahem, Richard," says Piggy. "Permit me to point out *je suis* never *out of control!* Hiiiiiii . . . "

"Veterinarian's Hospital" takes up most of the afternoon, then a tea break is called just as David Lazer appears on the floor with a visitor.

"There's nothing going on," says the visitor, disappointed.

"Nothing going on!" says David. "Let me tell you, the crew is setting up for Kermit's intros, Jim is having a conference with Jerry Juhl, Frank is giving his third interview of the day, Ray Charles is talking transatlantic with the manager of next week's guest, Derek Scott is running through the score for next week's show, Peter Harris is still dubbing in sound effects on the Brooke Shields show. It's got to the point where I know

Opposite: At left, Richard Hunt and Jerry Nelson, with Janice and Floyd up, perform "Fifty Ways to Leave Your Lover." At right, top to bottom, Animal, Floyd Pepper, Janice and Rizzo the Rat.

what's going on around here without even looking."

Since this is a four-day taping week, the puppeteers are back at the studio by 9:30 on Friday morning. The workday begins with Jim, Richard, Kathy, Louise and Steve in the performers' lounge, listening to the instrumental tracks for "The Cat Came Back," which will be taped later in the day. The music is broadcast over the eighteen-inch speaker the monitor sits on, and Kathy and Louise are singing along with it. Someone points out that they have recorded two sets of lyrics and asks which will be used.

"Probably the one in the script," says Jim, but this does not seem to be an irrevocable decision.

Richard Holloway, in the workshop, uses his walkie-talkie to pass on information to the director while, out on the floor, Phil Hawkes is lighting the set that will be used for the musical number—"Fifty Ways to Leave Your Lover"—which is first on the schedule today. This song will be performed by Animal, Janice, Floyd and Rizzo Rat, so Frank Oz, Richard Hunt, Jerry Nelson and Steve Whitmire are called to the floor,

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Left: Jim Henson's Muppet newscaster about to experience, as usual, the consequences of whatever dime-news story he is reporting.
Opposite: Frank Oz and Jerry Nelson in a race with a short fuse on set for "The Cat Came Back."

where Jim joins them. It is a relatively straightforward number—the staging is very simple—and the performers are soon ready for the first take. As the instrumental tracks begin to play over the speakers, Richard Hunt yells, "Hold it!" Someone has moved his monitor so he cannot see what Janice is doing. As he sets the monitor to the correct angle, Richard Holloway receives a message from the control booth that there is a technical problem with the video recording equipment. A tea break is called.

Jerry Nelson, Richard Hunt and Steve Whitmire retire to the performers' lounge. Frank Oz roams the shop, looking for a drawing Michael Frith has sent from New York. Jim Henson is on the phone talking to someone in the Hampstead office. Elsewhere in the shop Jim's daughter Cheryl is forming a pig's head from plastic foam, Barbara Davis is brushing Migg Piggy's hair, Polly Smith is hemming a costume that has been made for Annie Sue, Jan Rosenthal is sorting through a box of glass eyes, Bobby Payne is demonstrating a Pinocchio puppet he has been working on, Caryl Cruickshank is grooming the live Foo-Foo, and Bob McCormack is estimating costs for special puppets needed for an upcoming show.

At 11:20 everyone involved in "Fifty Ways to Leave Your Lover" is back on the floor. The set-up has Janice and Floyd, the vocalists, in front of a large drum-like podium on top of which is Animal's drum set. While Animal plays, Rizzo Rat peeks over his shoulders and draws snarls from the drummer.

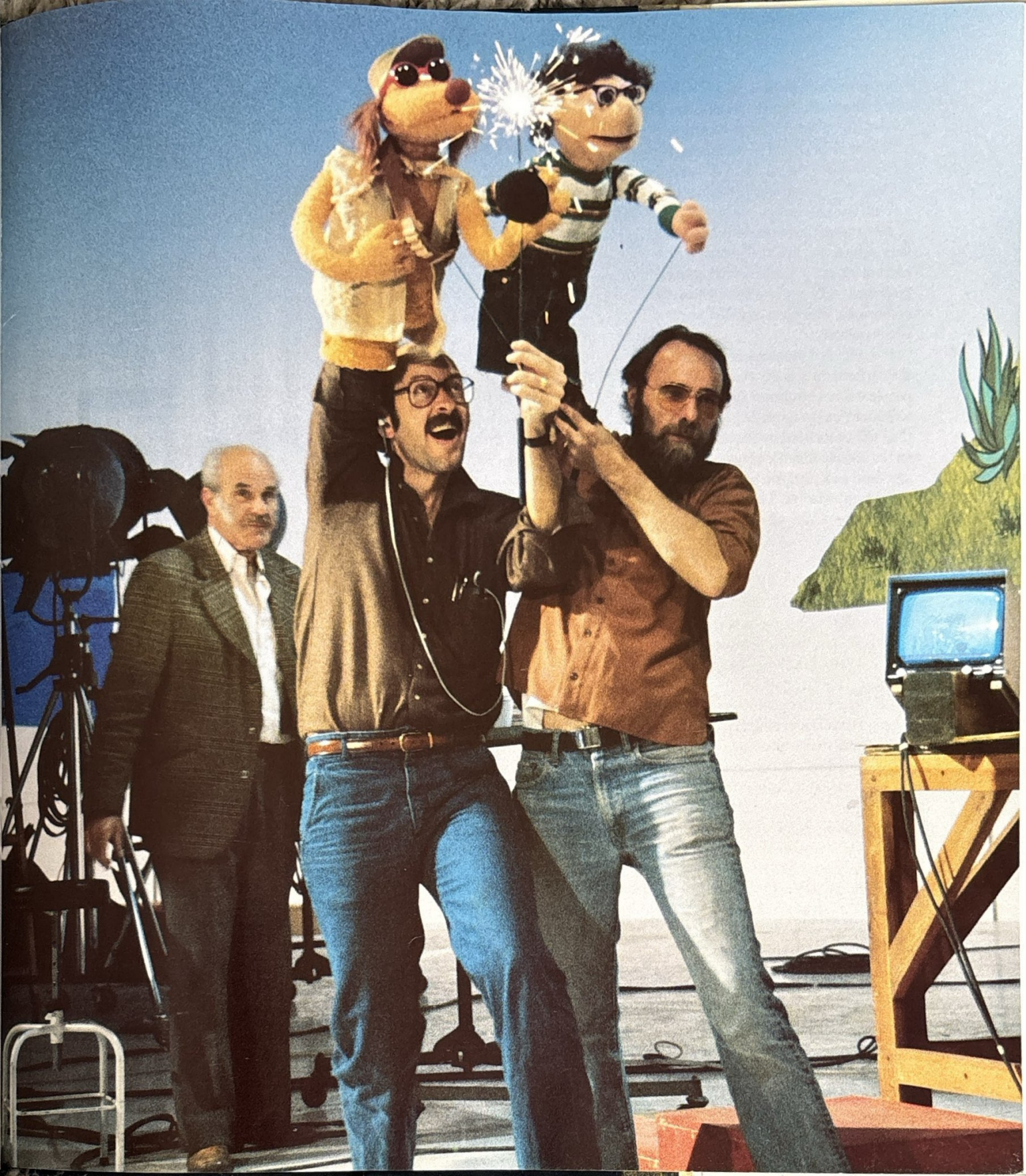
The first take is unsatisfactory because Rizzo is not visible enough. The second take is good, but might be improved on.

"Let's try one more," says Jim. "A do-or-die take, okay?"

As they watch the playback, it is the sideplay between Animal and Rizzo that draws the most laughs.

"Frank and Steve give a lesson in scene-stealing," says Jim with a grin.

By 12:15 everything is set for the taping of a segment of "Muppet News." The gag involves an appeal to the public to return library books. A propman is to unload a



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carton of books onto the head of the newscaster. The books will fall from a height of about fifteen feet, and for protection Jim and Louise, who are operating the newscaster, wear hardhats. Exactly on cue, a cascade of books descends on the anchorman's head and he disappears from sight behind his desk, only to reappear a few seconds later—the take is over—and announce weakly, "I'm going to talk to the writers. I've had enough of these bookish jokes."

With that, he vanishes behind the desk once more.

After lunch the puppeteers begin to rehearse "The Cat Came Back." The set is a very simple one, like an illustration in a story book. A two-dimensional cottage—a painted cut-out—is silhouetted against an illuminated blue screen across which projected "clouds" move from left to right. The props consist of a cut-out of an automobile, which can be rolled across the floor on a dolly, and a squat, brightly painted circus cannon.

If the set and props are simple, however, the routine itself is complicated for some of the performers at least, even though the voice tracks have been pre-recorded so that people will not be encumbered with headsets and trailing cables. The verse of the song, which carries the narrative, is to be sung by Rowlf, operated as usual by Jim, who this time will be assisted by Steve. (Steve's job is to control the hand that changes chords on the ukelele Rowlf is playing.) Dave Goelz has a relatively easy assignment; he is stationed on a platform behind the cottage, working a canine fiddler who is positioned in a cut-out window. Louise Gold must crouch on a similar platform at the back of the rolling automobile, where she operates another dog, the driver. Richard Hunt is in charge of an old-looking dog—a sort of bloodhound—while Jerry Nelson controls a small-boy puppet, the owner of the cat in the title.

These last two have tricky parts to perform, but the most demanding role has been given to Kathy Mullen, who is handling the cat itself, a streetwise-looking tabby with a piratical patch over one eye. Kathy is called upon to dodge about all over the set. She must place her cat in the arms of the boy (Jerry), who then hands it to the old dog (Richard). Richard's dog takes the cat—which is still on Kathy's arm—out of camera range, then Kathy picks up her cue to bring the cat back across the foreground of the shot from left to right, making sure that the puppet is at exactly the right height and looks at the camera at the right moment. (Although Kathy is tall, she must wear built-up shoes to equalize her height with Richard and Jerry, who are both six-footers.) As she exits from the foreground, she has to rush, off camera, to the back of the cottage in order to appear on its porch at the appropriate point in the lyrics.

This is just the first chorus, and the number is staged in such a way as to require a continuous take for the first two and a half choruses, until the point at which the cat is placed in the muzzle of the cannon. The problem that emerges, as the puppeteers rehearse, is the handover of the cat from the boy to the old dog. Jerry and Richard just cannot find a way of doing this that does not seem awkward. Watched carefully by Jim, they try different handovers, but none of them seems to work. The performers, taking their skills for granted, knowing there is a right way to do this, are becoming frustrated. Finally, after almost an hour of work, the handover works for the first time. Somebody has made a minute adjustment—nobody is even quite sure what it was—and the problem is solved.

"We got it!" yells Jerry.

"Are we ready to try for a take?" asks Richard Holloway.

Another long afternoon in Studio D is under way.

Left: In Studio D, Steve Whitmire, Jim Henson, Jerry Nelson, Kathy Mullen and Karen Prell prepare for shooting "The Cat Came Back." Below: Hurrying to make her cue, Kathy Mullen brings Gaffer, her indestructible cat, back into shot.

The
MUPPET
SHOW

7. Promo

During the course of each week Jim Henson and Frank Oz take time out to tape two promotional spots. While this may sound like a routine chore, it is actually one of the high spots of the week, for performers and crew alike, because these little routines are completely improvised. The form they usually take is that Frank, working with Fozzie, attempts to surprise Jim, working with Kermit, by performing some breathtakingly vacuous little bit of business, one of those Fozzie gags that are so bad they become good. The suspense preceding each take is real, since until the last moment Frank has no idea what he is going to do.

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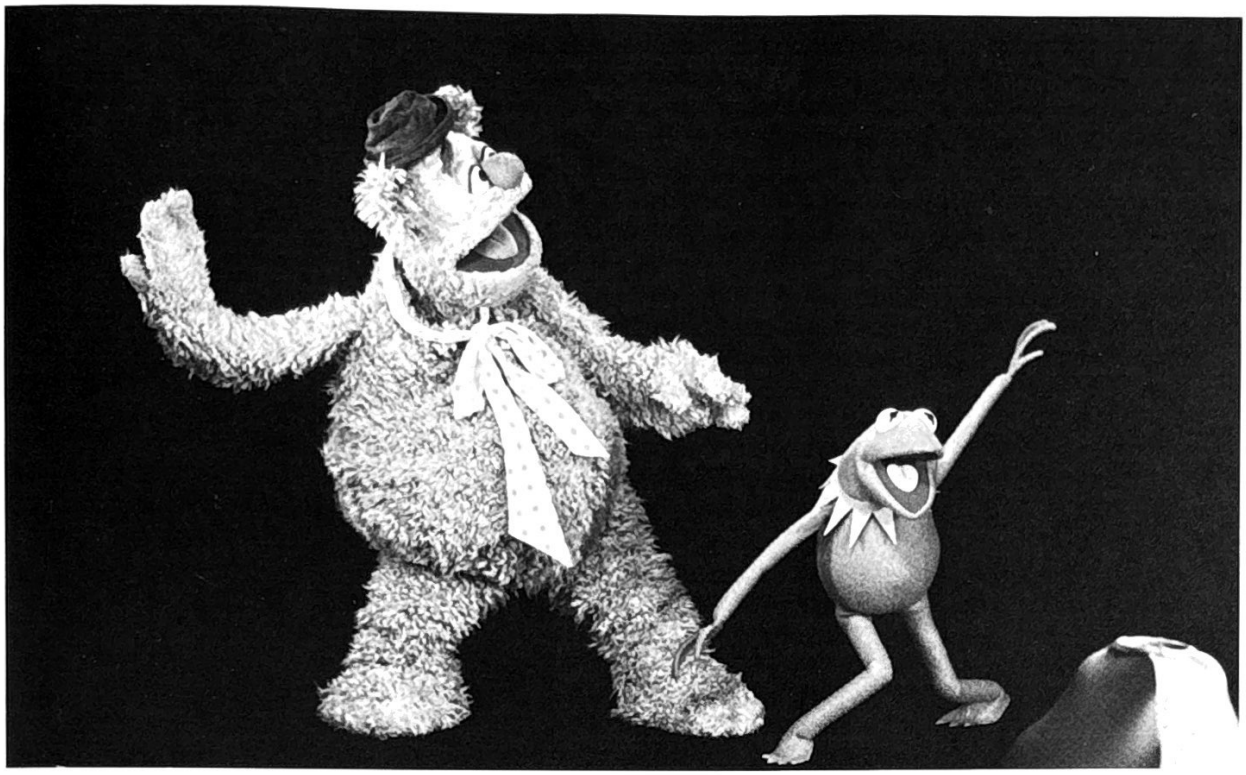

Above: Fozzie and Kermit step out. Opposite: Fozzie Bear peers through the curtains, trepidatiously trying to gauge the mood of his audience.

On a Friday afternoon Jim has Kermit up in front of a curtain. Jim watches his monitor while Kermit glances over his shoulder toward Frank and Fozzie, who are waiting off camera. Fozzie is holding a towel in one hand. Grips and electricians, normally blasé about happenings on set, are watching from the floor. In the performers' lounge the sound is turned up on the big black-and-white monitor.

"This is the thirty-second spot, right?" asks Frank.

"Right."

"Tape is rolling," calls out Richard Holloway. "We have speed . . . Fifteen seconds . . ."

"Oh, goody!" says Kermit.

"Five seconds . . . quiet, gentlemen . . ."

Frank approaches Jim from behind and Fozzie begins to rub Kermit with the towel. Kermit does a double take, then says in an exasperated voice, "Fozzie, what do you think you're doing?"

Fozzie chuckles and continues to rub Kermit with the towel.

"Cut it out!" says Kermit. "What *are* you doing?"

"Dry cleaning," says Fozzie. "Har? Har?"

There is a loud communal groan from the floor.

"That bad, huh?" says Frank. "Okay, I've got another one. This next one," he continues, slipping back into character as Fozzie, "is just *great!* It is so fun*nee!*"

"Let's go for it," says Jim.

"You bet," says Fozzie, as an assistant replaces the towel in his hand with a large hammer.

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Season

Deborah Harry

Johnny Cash

Linda Ronstadt

Paul Simon

Wally Boag

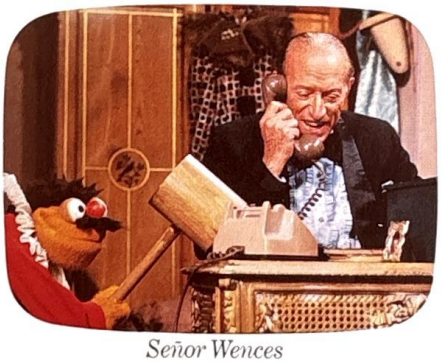
Shirley Bassey

James Coburn

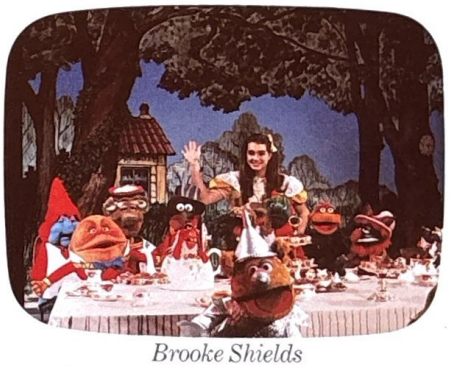
Gladys Knight

Joan Baez

Tony Randall



Señor Wences



Brooke Shields

V

Roger Moore

Mac Davis

Jean Pierre Rampal

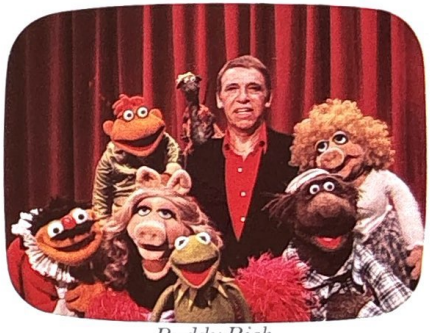
Melissa Manchester

Loretta Swit

Glenda Jackson

Gene Kelly

Marty Feldman



Buddy Rich

Christopher Langham

Carol Burnett

Hal Linden

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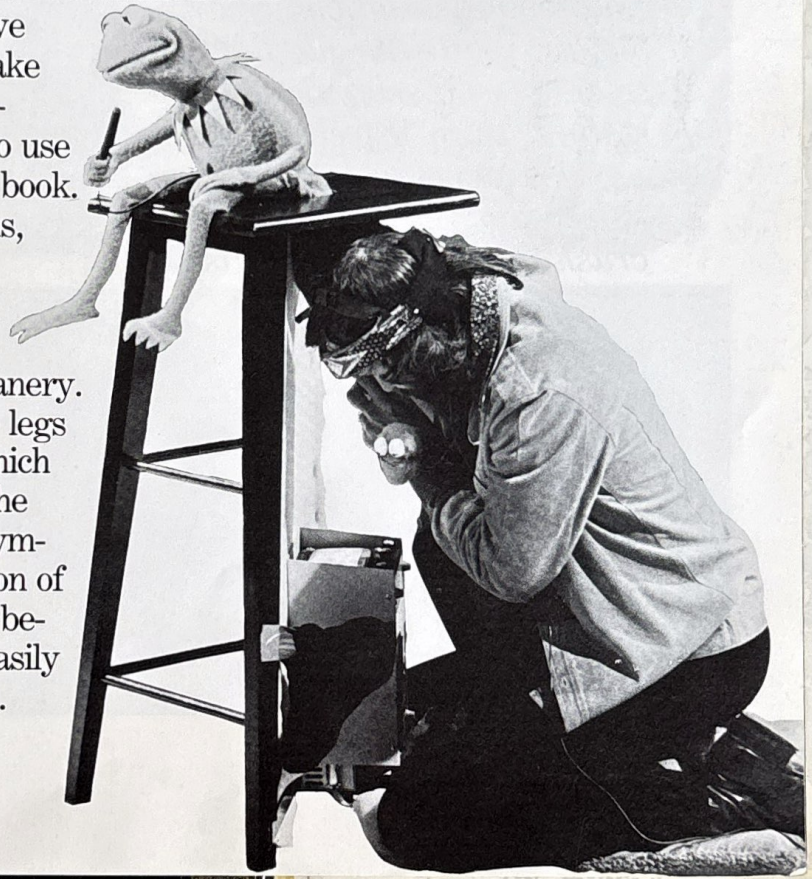
PHILIPS

8. Special Effects

Jim Henson and his associates are not purists, do not adhere to any classic system of puppetry, or of anything else. The golden rule in the world of *The Muppet Show* is, "If it works for us, we'll use it." Add to this Jim's love of technical trickery, his infatuation with television as a medium to be manipulated, and you have a show that is often loaded with special effects (and some that are effective rather than special). The Muppets will take advantage of the most sophisticated electronic gadgets, but are equally content to use the simplest devices in the effects man's book. When, to sing a duet with Andy Williams, Kermit perched on a stool—apparently without assistance—viewers inclined to watch for such things probably suspected some elaborate electronic chicanery. In fact no such thing was employed. The legs of the stool were bisected by a mirror which faced the camera. The mirror reflected the back of the front legs which, given the symmetry of the structure, created the illusion of a complete stool. Jim was able to crouch behind the mirror and operate Kermit as easily as if he were hidden by a solid brick wall.



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Spectacular sets and the imaginative use of special effects are frequently to be seen on The Muppet Show. For a musical number featuring Loretta Swit and Thog—an oversized monster performed by Steve Whitmire—set designer Malcolm Stone and ATV craftsmen created a miniature southern California landscape, complete with a city, chaparral-clad foothills and suburban homes. While the guest star, as a scientist in a seismographic station, sang "I feel the earth move under my feet," Thog stomped across this landscape, crushing everything in his path.

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Sometimes the simple and the sophisticated meet in a single shot. On a Thursday morning an eposide of "Pigs in Space" is being taped. It revolves around a steamer trunk—containing Kermit (along with Gonzo's fungus collection)—which First Mate Piggy, assisted by Frank Oz, has brought aboard the *Swinetrek* with much panting and grunting. Link (Jim Henson assisted by Louise Gold) asks what a steamer trunk is doing aboard a spaceship and Piggy explains that it is in fact a deadly battle robot disguised as a steamer trunk, an explanation that brings out all of Link's barely latent cowardice. Strangepork (Jerry Nelson) sets Link's mind at rest by promising to obliterate the robot/trunk with his newly perfected death ray. When he points his ray gun at the trunk, two things must happen: a burst of light must flash between the gun and the trunk, and smoke must rise from the trunk at the spot where the ray hits it. The death ray itself is produced with the aid of an electronic matte system known as Chromakey, which enables images to be isolated by one camera and superimposed on the image that is being recorded by another camera. In this instance a cartoon-like flash of light—a two-dimensional graphic—is to be superimposed for a fraction of a second on the scene from "Pigs in Space." As Chromakey shots go, this is a very basic one. The only difficulty is in matching the action on screen to the matted flash. It is simple enough to line the death ray up with the trunk, which is static at this point, but Jerry is confronted with the task of having Strangepork hold the gun in exactly the right position so that the ray appears to be coming from its muzzle. This is not easy since Jerry has no visual guide other than his monitor to tell him where the flash will appear. Essentially he has to work by intuition, and the first time he tries, Strangepork is actually half hidden by a prop.

"We can't see you, *chéri*," Frank has Piggy say. "Try to remember you're a very short pig."

Watching the monitor carefully, Jerry rehearses until he can move the ray gun into the exact position every time. There now remains the question of the smoke which is to rise from the trunk as the ray hits it. This is achieved by means of a device so simple that it delights everybody.

Richard Holloway is stationed behind the trunk, out of camera shot, directly below the point where the ray will hit. He is equipped with a lighted cigarette and takes a deep drag on it, which he holds in his lungs until he sees on a monitor that the death ray is striking the trunk. Then he blows the smoke upward so that it seems to be rising from the trunk's lid. As this is rehearsed for the first time, everyone begins to laugh.

"Spectacular," says Jerry.

"That's a very special effect, Richard," says Frank.

"It looked all right, didn't it?" Richard asks earnestly.

"It looked *great!*" says Frank.

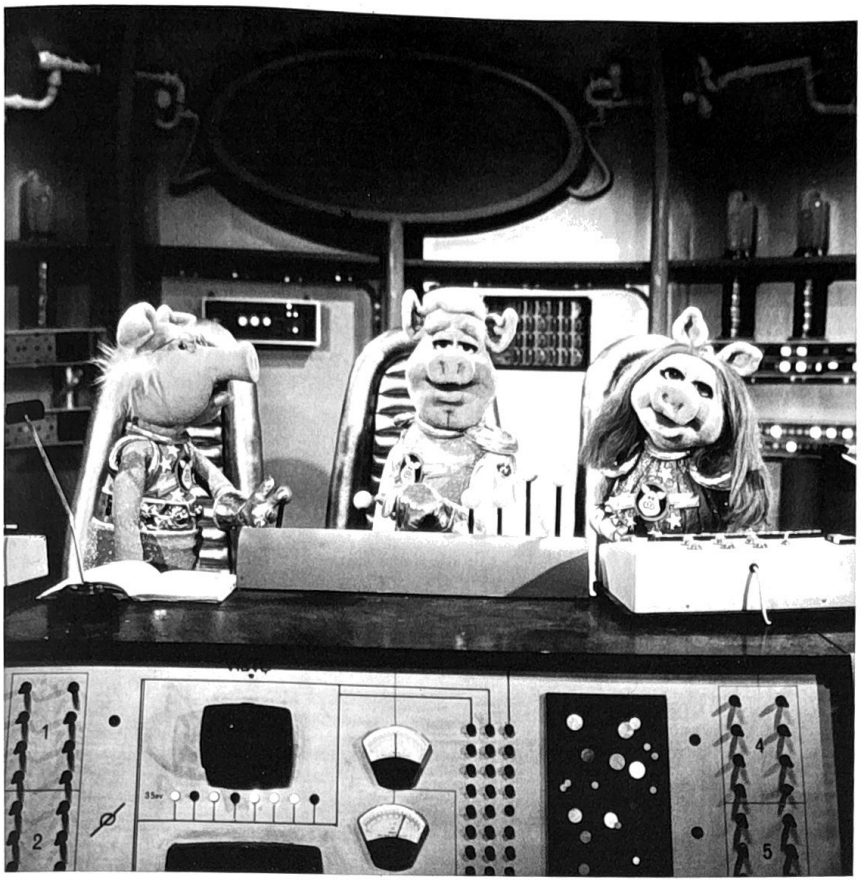
"This is going to be a wonderful moment," says Jim, "all because of this expensive special effect."

Even when everything has been carefully lined up and rehearsed, things can still go wrong. On the first take the Chromakey misfunctions and no flash appears on screen. Not missing a beat, Jerry has Strangepork stare at the gun in disbelief.

"I can't imagine what happened," he improvises. "I had it plugged into the electricity."

"You need a fifteen-amp fuse," retorts Link with a porcine guffaw.

Later that same morning a second segment of "Pigs in Space" is being shot while the set is still installed and lit. This episode involves effects of a very different kind, purely



The regular cast of "Pigs in Space"—Dr. Julius Strangepork, Captain Link Hogthrob and First Mate Piggy—here seen aboard the Swinetrek in an early episode of this continuing space opera.

mechanical effects that could be employed just as convincingly within the context of a live theatrical event.

The *Swinetrek* is caught in a meteor storm, but Link assures First Mate Piggy that no meteor can penetrate the superstrength Porkium alloy from which the hull of the spaceship is constructed. Strangepork concurs with Link's opinion, saying there is absolutely no possibility of any damage. Needless to say, it is at precisely this juncture, according to the script, that a meteor punctures the hull, creating a hole "about the size of a pig's fist." There is to be a rush of air and all the loose papers and light objects in the control room will be blown about.

"Of course, I'm usually wrong about everything," Strangepork blithely observes.

The scene continues with Link and Strangepork plugging the hole with Piggy's snout. When she protests, vociferously, they grind pepper near her nose and she sneezes her way out of the hole. Air begins to rush out of the ship once more, sucking Link's head into the hole.

"Don't worry," says Piggy. "It's not a vital organ."

For obvious practical reasons the puppeteers rehearse this scene without the effects. When they are ready to commit the action to tape, a hole will be blown in the wall of the set with the aid of a "woofer"—a powerful compressed-air device—and a huge fan will be started to set the papers blowing about the command deck of the *Swinetrek*. To add palpability to the swirling air, Fuller's earth—actually fine dust—

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Left: After a production number with a Russian setting, part of which was shot in a special effects snowstorm, Louise Gold collapses in a field of synthetic snow. Opposite: As Miss Piggy leads her motorcycle gang into action singing "Leader of the Pack," prop men pipe up a miasma of exhaust fumes.

will be thrown in front of the fan so that it too will be blown about the set. When the performers are ready to go, Frank turns to the others and says, "I hope to God we can do this in a single take."

As the take gets under way, the reason for his remark becomes obvious. The "woofer" blasts a hole in the wall with a deafening explosion. An electrician turns on the fan, and paper and choking dust begin to swirl about the set in fierce gusts. Except for a few seconds while Piggy's snout blocks the hole, the scene must be played under conditions that are next to impossible. The dust gets into eyes, noses and throats, and the performers' monitors are hidden from them by flying papers. It is like working in a tornado. To all intents and purposes, the puppeteers are performing blind. At the end of the take Frank runs off the set, choking. Jerry follows, pulling off his glasses and rubbing his eyes. Louise staggers out of the dust storm swearing and cursing.

"That's what I get for washing my hair," she sputters. "Do you know I just had a three-hour henna treatment?"

Even the camera operators are dabbing at their eyes with handkerchiefs and Kleenex. Only Jim Henson seems to have enjoyed the whole thing. Grinning, he asks to see the playback.

Incredibly, everything has gone flawlessly at the first attempt. If there were any technical mishaps—if someone's head was in shot, for example—they were hidden by the swirling dust and papers.

The following day finds a scene being shot that will involve a typical bit of

Chromakey illusionism. The morning begins with the dressing of a set that represents the workshop of the puppetmaker Gepetto. In the foreground Pinocchio reclines on a workbench amid sawdust and wood shavings. In the background a dozen or so puppets—these include a clown, a toy soldier, a rabbit and a doll—are hanging from the workshop walls or resting on shelves. Eventually these will be operated through holes cut in the back of the set, but for the moment they are limp and lifeless. As the lighting is adjusted, a group of Muppet designers stands watching a monitor, making sure their creations look right on camera. Puppeteers—the regulars augmented by auxiliaries from the shop—begin to take up their positions behind the set. Steve Whitmire settles under the workbench, from where he will be operating Pinocchio. Jerry Nelson, assisted by Karen Prell, will be stationed in the middle of the set to operate Pops, the stage doorman, who will be playing the role of Gepetto.

The action will be synchronized to the song "Just Pull My Strings." During the course of the number Pinocchio and the other puppets come to life and dance, much to Pops' amazement. It is Pops himself, however, who starts the whole thing in motion by picking up the wooden control bars to which Pinocchio's marionette strings are attached. (Here again we have an example of the Muppets' "whatever works" philosophy. This Pinocchio is a make-believe marionette. In reality Steve operates the puppet from below by means of rods.)

The morning is taken up with rehearsing and taping the beginning and end of the number, sections that do not call for any camera magic, though they do provide the puppeteers with plenty of opportunities for private jokes. At the end of one take, as Pinoke collapses back onto the workbench, Jerry has Pops rush forward, gasp in horror, put an ear to the supine puppet's chest, tap it with two fingers, then frantically apply the kiss of life. At the conclusion of another take Jim calls out, "We didn't all die together." A rabbit controlled by Dave Goelz begins to sob: "I don't want to die! I promise to be a good bunny. I'm too young to die!"

After lunch the puppeteers move on to the middle sections of the number, and it is here that Chromakey work is involved. For this long insert Pinocchio is moved across the studio to a tabletop—the size of the workbench—covered with a bright blue cloth. Camera 2 is trained on him there while Camera 1 is still focused on the workshop set. Behind Pinocchio is a blue fabric screen the same tint as the fabric on the table, and soon Steve Whitmire, Dave Goelz and Bobby Payne appear wearing tunics, gloves and hoods that are dyed to match the screen. They go to work, making Pinocchio perform a kind of disco dance, and the monitor—when Camera 2 is live—shows nothing but Pinocchio and the faces of the three puppeteers. Then a blue sheet is draped over the puppeteers' heads (it is loose enough for them to see monitors on the floor). When Camera 1 and Camera 2 are live simultaneously, Pinocchio is superimposed on the workshop set and seems to be dancing on the workbench. The blue background is obliterated.

Now the puppeteers who will be working on the main set are called to the floor and rehearsals begin in earnest. On the monitor Pinocchio appears to be interacting with the other puppets, although he is actually sixty feet away from them. The only problem is that folds in the cloth draped over the heads of Steve, Dave and Bobby are showing up on the monitor as inexplicable shadows cast across the workshop set. All that can be done is to adjust the cloth again and again until the electronic shadows virtually disappear. This process takes close to an hour, but when it is over, the insert is satisfactorily committed to tape in just a couple of takes.

Above and right: Shooting the opening of The Muppet Show, Muppet performers go into action behind a prop colonnade. Note the built-up shoes worn by Dave Goelz to equalize his height with the other puppeteers.
Opposite: The original sketch made to locate Muppets in their proper places for the credit sequence.

9. Closing Comments

Each *Muppet Show* ends with Statler and Waldorf's barbed closing comments, and this particular week that happens to be the last scene to be taped. Only essential personnel are still on hand. Since they will not be needed anymore, most of the Muppet performers have already left the studio. The workshop is still busy, however, with builders preparing puppets for next week's show, and Frank Oz, in the performers' lounge, is on the telephone to New York. David Lazer and Jerry Juhl are on the studio floor waiting to talk to Jim Henson, who, with Richard Hunt, is standing behind the theater-box set, where Debbie Coda is making last-minute adjustments to Statler and Waldorf's clothing. The crew goes off duty at 7:30 and everyone is anxious to finish up everything before they leave.

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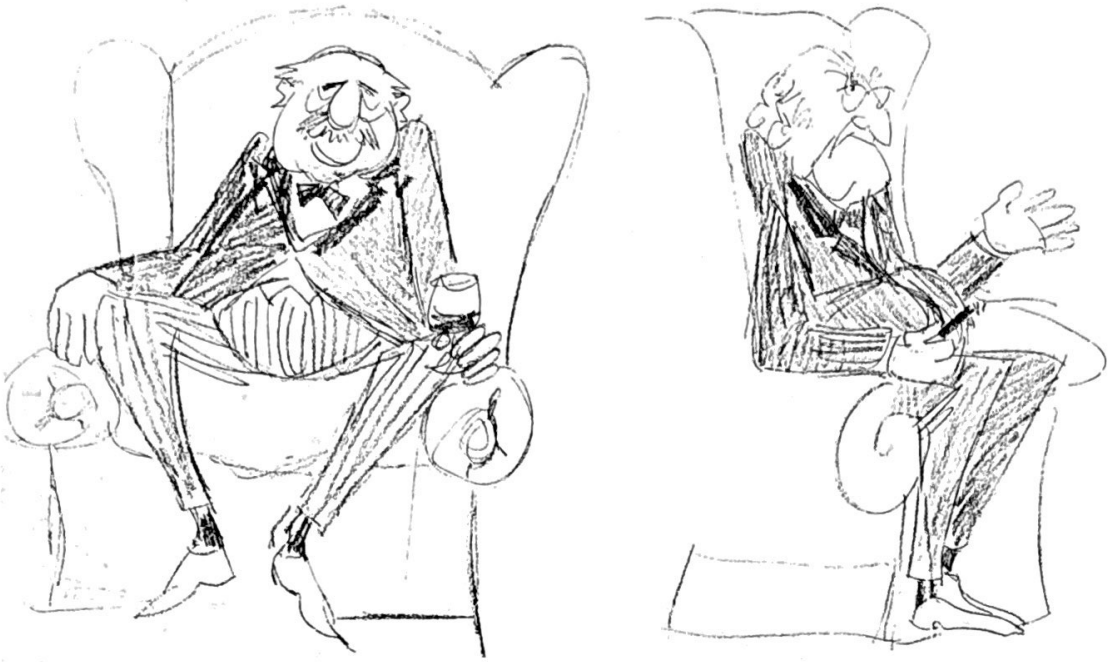

Above: Bonnie Erickson's original sketches for the curmudgeonly Statler, right, and Waldorf. Opposite: An unexpected visitor invades Statler and Waldorf's box.

"How much time do we have?" asks Jim.

"A bit under twenty minutes," an assistant floor manager tells him.

"Okay, let's get a move on," says Jim, getting Waldorf in place on his arm and flexing the puppet's jaw.

Richard has Statler up on his arm now. "I'm not as young as I used to be," ad-libs Statler. "I can't take all this rush, rush, rush."

"You haven't had a rush in fifty years, you old fool," returns Waldorf.

"Are we ready?" asks Richard Holloway.

Jim nods.

"Tape is rolling," says Richard Holloway.

"Just a second," says Richard Hunt. "The old geezer's vest has come unbuttoned."

There is a brief pause while Debbie buttons the vest.

"All set," says Jim.

"Tape is still rolling."

The first take begins.

"I wouldn't believe it if I hadn't watched it," says Statler.

"Believe what?" asks Waldorf.

"I don't know. I wasn't watching," says Statler with a guffaw.

"Was that all right, Jim?" inquires Richard Holloway.

"I don't know," says Jim. "I think I came in too soon on my line. Let's look at the playback."

"Twelve minutes left," someone tells him.

They watch the playback and Jim shakes his head.

"It could pass, but let's try it again."

"Everyone ready?" asks Richard Holloway. "Okay, in fifteen seconds, then . . . Very quiet everywhere, if you please . . . Absolute quiet . . . In five . . ."

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Credits from The Muppet Show

Produced by
Jim Henson

Executive Producer
David Lazer

Writers
Jerry Juhl (head writer)
Jack Burns (producer & head writer first season)
Marc London
Joseph A. Bailey
Don Hinkley
Chris Langham
David Odell
James Thurman
Jim Henson

Directed by
Peter Harris
Philip Casson

Muppet Performers
featuring Frank Oz
Jerry Nelson
Richard Hunt
Dave Goelz
Eren Ozker
John Lovelady
Peter Friedman
Fran Brill
Cynthia Adler
Rollin Krewson
Louise Gold
Steve Whitmire
Kathryn Mullen
Bob Payne
Betsy Baytos
Karen Prell
Brian Muehl
Jim Henson

The Muppet Designers
Bonnie Erickson
Caroly Wilcox
Mari Kaestle
Dave Goelz
John Lovelady
Rollin Krewson
"Faz" Fazakas
Larry Jameson
Kermit Love
Jan Rosenthal
Wendy Midener
Tim Miller
Barbara Davis
Sherry Arnott
Bob Payne
Ed Christie
Nomi Fredrick
Lyle Conway
Sal Denaro
Janet Kuhl
Tim Rose
Leslee Asch
Marianne Harms
Ann Keeba Tenenbaum
Jane Gootnick
Cheryl Henson
Tom McLaughlin
Cheryl Blalock
Joanne Green
Debbie Schneider

Special Puppets by
Don Sahlin

Muppet Costumes by
Calista Hendrickson
Polly Smith

Muppet Workshop Supervisors
Amy Van Gilder
Robert McCormack
Sara Paul

Muppet Design Consultant
Michael K. Frith

Creative Consultant
Frank Oz

Choreographers
Norman Maen
Gillian Lynne

Orchestra Conducted by
Jack Parnell

Musical Associate
Derek Scott

Music Consultants
Larry Grossman
Ray Charles

Art Directors
David Chandler
Malcolm Stone
Leigh Malone
Bryan Holgate
Richard Plumb
Richard Lake
Su Chases

Theme music by
Sam Pottle

Lighting Directors
John Rook
Phil Hawkes

Audio
Roger Knight
Ted Scott

Video Tape Editors
John Hawkins
Tim Waddell

Senior Floor Manager
Richard Holloway

Floor Managers
Martin Baker
Guy Frazer Jones
Stephen Springford

Stage Managers
Caryl Cruickshank
Katie Coley

Costumers
Ann Hollowood
James Dark
Sue Lecash

Makeup by
Mary Southgate
Shirley Muslin
Sheila Mann

Assistant to the Producer
Joan Chaplow
Sue Paul

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